

ADDRESS BY THE HON'BLE PRESIDENT OF INDIA SHRI RAM NATH KOVIND ON THE OCCASION OF INAUGURATION OF THE MAHATMA GANDHI INTERNATIONAL SANITATION CONVENTION

Relevant for: Ethics | Topic: Human Values - Lessons from the lives and teachings of great Leaders, Reformers and Administrators

President's Secretariat

Address by the Hon'ble President of India Shri Ram Nath Kovind on the Occasion of Inauguration of the Mahatma Gandhi International Sanitation Convention

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1. Namaskar, good morning and a warm welcome to all of you! I am happy to be here to inaugurate the Mahatma Gandhi International Sanitation Convention. The timing, theme and setting of this Convention are apt. Four days from now, on October 2, we will formally commence the commemoration of the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, and this Convention is an appropriate process by which to welcome that remarkable event. Mahatma Gandhi was an early proponent of the universal right to sanitation. He saw it as intrinsic to the quest for human freedom and dignity for all those who live on our shared planet.
2. For us in India, Mahatma Gandhi was, still remains and always will be a moral exemplar, a role model and a guiding light. It was with his principles in our hearts and minds that on October 2, 2014, the government of India inaugurated the Swachh Bharat campaign to institutionalise modern sanitation systems and remove the curse of open defecation from India. In the past four years, in keeping with the traditions and teachings of Gandhiji, I am happy to note that Swachh Bharat has become a mass movement with domestic and international participation.
3. Many may wonder what Mahatma Gandhi had to do with an issue such as sanitation. He led India and indeed South Asia in the largely peaceful and nonviolent battle for Independence and for freedom from imperialism and colonialism. He was an inspiration for other societies and nations in Asia, Africa and Latin America as they too fought to overcome colonial oppression and stand on their own feet, as masters of their destinies.
4. To this day, decades after he left us, Mahatma Gandhi is still a symbol of hope in societies where he lived, in societies that have looked upon him with admiration, and even in

societies that, in his time, may have opposed him. Whether it is the struggle for ethnic or racial parity – or for civil liberties for ordinary men and women wherever they may be – Mahatma Gandhi is human civilisation's talisman for all times to come.

5. Yet, for Gandhiji, political independence and self-rule were only part of the larger enterprise of human freedom. For him, the dignity of each human life, of each individual, was of the essence. He strived not just for a free India but a better and a just India, and for a better and a just world. In his perceptive manner, he made an early link between sanitation and the wider concept of freedom and dignity. Writing in Navajivan, a newspaper he edited, Gandhiji said as far back as 1925: "A lavatory must be as clean as a drawing-room ... The cause of many of our diseases is the condition of our lavatories and our bad habit of disposing of excreta anywhere and everywhere. I, therefore, believe in the absolute necessity of a clean place for answering the call of nature and clean articles for use at the time."

6. Twelve years later, in 1937, a fellow Indian, living in a village in what is today the state of West Bengal, in the eastern part of our country, wrote to Mahatma Gandhi. He asked him to define his "ideal village". The response was telling. "An ideal village," Gandhiji wrote in reply, "will be so constructed as to lend itself to perfect sanitation ... The very first problem the village worker will solve is its sanitation."

7. It takes a visionary and enlightened mind to value human freedom in terms of everyday access to sanitation facilities. It takes a visionary and enlightened mind to extend the definition of politics and of political activism to providing sanitation for all. Mahatma Gandhi was such a visionary and enlightened mind. We are all fortunate to be living in his extended shadow.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

8. It was three years ago, in September 2015, that the 193 member-states of the United Nations General Assembly resolved to transform our world – they unanimously adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The 2030 Agenda is a call to action for our people, our planet and our collective prosperity. The nations of the Earth have committed themselves to "end poverty in all its forms", to put the world on "a sustainable and resilient path" and to ensure that "no one will be left behind". This promise that "no one will be left behind" is particularly important in the context of enhancing access to, and eliminating inequalities in, sanitation services.

9. Achieving universal access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene by 2030 is a major challenge in many parts of the world. Drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene are central to Sustainable Development Goal 6, especially targets 6.1, 6.2 and 6.3. They are also essential to the health and well-being of our people, as envisaged in Sustainable Development Goal 3.

10. Target 6.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals calls for countries to end open defecation, ensure everyone has access to a basic toilet and put in place systems for safe management of excreta. Target 6.2 also highlights the importance of hygiene and urges special attention to the needs of women and girls.
11. Improving access to sanitation and eradicating open defecation have enormous implications. They are critical social and economic investments. I have been told that washing one's hands with soap, especially after contact with human waste, can reduce diarrhoeal diseases by 40 per cent and respiratory infections by 30 per cent. It is worth noting that diarrhoea and respiratory infections cause among the highest number of child deaths in India.
12. And children who survive frequent diarrhoea attacks are nevertheless vulnerable to malnutrition and infections like pneumonia. Malnutrition, in turn, affects cognitive development and learning in school. Years later, this has a negative impact on job and employment prospects. Clearly, the absence of a suitable toilet and appropriate hygiene and sanitation practices can lead to life-long disadvantages. Therefore, for us in India – as elsewhere – a mission such as Swachh Bharat is critical to securing our human capital and our demographic dividend – and to giving our children a better future.
13. In the case of girl-children and women, the situation is even more acute. Absence of immediate toilet facilities, at home, in the workplace and – perhaps this is most vital – at school, place an unacceptable burden on our daughters. There are health problems that arise, in addition to the risks to personal dignity and physical safety in the search for something as basic as a clean toilet. No young girl should have to give up school only because a girls' toilet is not available.
14. Such an occurrence would be a scar on our collective conscience. Gandhiji would not forgive us if we did not make every effort to correct such injustice. And it is such situations and such wrongs that Swachh Bharat and every one of its foot-soldiers – be they tens of thousands of dedicated sanitation workers, millions of self-motivated volunteers, or senior government officials – are determined to set right. Here I must commend our Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi, and the government of India for making sanitation a national priority.
15. Swachh Bharat literally means Clean India. In the four years that it has been in operation, the Swachh Bharat Mission has sought to create a cleaner India – with more efficient waste management, cleaner public and private places, improved sanitation, universal use of toilets and so on. Even so, Swachh Bharat is not just about physical cleaning – it is as much about a spiritual and social cleansing and reawakening. When it completes its mission, it will provide every one of India's 1.3 billion people – one-sixth of humanity – an

opportunity for a dramatic leap. The Swachh Bharat Mission, the focused sanitation effort and the broader Sustainable Development Goals represent a once-in-many-generations moment. We are that chosen generation.

16. The relentless and strenuous labours of the past four years have led India to significant milestones. Sanitation coverage was at 39 per cent at the start of the Swachh Bharat Mission in 2014. Today, the figure is almost 95 per cent. I am given to understand that as of this morning, 503 of India's 699 districts have been declared open-defecation free; 3622 of India's 4041 urban local bodies have been declared open-defecation free; and 487,445 villages have been declared open-defecation free. About 85 million rural households and six million urban households have begun to use toilets for the first time. Swachh Bharat has helped them renounce the troubling practice of open defecation.
17. India has moved ahead with grit, determination and unusual urgency. Swachh Bharat is a revolution playing out in real time. As an instrument of mass mobilisation, as a people's movement, and as a national goal towards which there is near total commitment, Swachh Bharat represents for me the spirit of our Independence movement. I imagine Mahatma Gandhi would have been proud of the millions of ordinary men and women who are the true stars of this Mission. No doubt his blessings are with us as India strives to eliminate open defecation in its entirety by October 2, 2019. This is the best 150th birthday gift we can give Gandhiji.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

18. The Swachh Bharat Mission has been shaped by among the world's leading specialists on sanitation, some of whom are in this room and in fact on this stage. It has been scripted by common Indians of uncommon quality – men and women of rare courage, of foresight, social empathy and civic pride. Individually and collectively, they have worked to free their neighbourhoods, their villages and their towns and cities from open defecation. Inch by inch, day by day, person by person, family by family, they have persuaded fellow citizens to adopt behaviour change. Our sanitation champions come from all regions of the country, all sections of society, all communities and all social and economic groups. It was my privilege to meet and honour some of them in Kanpur in 2017 at the inauguration of the Swachhata hi Seva – or Cleanliness as Service – campaign. I realised then that this programme had created millions of grassroots enablers. Mahatma Gandhi gave our country Satyagrahis – warriors of truth. Swachh Bharat has given us Swachhagrahis – warriors of sanitation.
19. Our Swachhagrahis are crafting a remarkable legacy. A recent World Health Organisation study estimates that Swachh Bharat would have saved 300,000 lives during the course of the programme itself. In the long run, it will save 150,000 lives a year. Few social investments are as beneficial. According to UNICEF, which has done a cost-benefit analysis of the Swachh Bharat Mission, every rupee invested in improving sanitation will eventually save Indian families and Indian society between four and five rupees.

Friends,

20. One of the remarkable attributes of Gandhiji was that he was both a fervent nationalist and an internationalist. In my travels abroad as the President of India, I have been touched by the warmth and respect people from diverse countries show for him. Statues and memorials depicting him are being erected to this day. Mahatma Gandhi thought for India, and he thought for the world. In keeping with India's ancient wisdom, he taught us to see the world as our family and to make universal well-being the end-goal of all of our domestic and national efforts. As such Swachh Bharat is at once a voice from the soul of India and a commitment made at the United Nations while accepting the challenge of Sustainable Development Goals – as well as a template for partner nations for whom our experience can be of any benefit.

21. Our successes with Swachh Bharat, our attainments in the sphere of sanitation, our methods and our mechanisms, are available to all of you, to all the friendly countries present here, and others as well, to use as you deem necessary. In the end, access to improved sanitation is not a target and a goal for one country or the other – it is the interlinked destiny of humankind.

22. In this regard, and based on our experience here in India, I would like to suggest five important themes that countries may choose to adopt while meeting the problem of insufficient sanitation. We could call this the Fivefold Path to Sanitation:

- I. Ensure people lead the planning, implementation and management of sanitation programmes
- II. Use smart and affordable technologies for effective and efficient service delivery
- III. Eliminate all forms of inequalities in service delivery
- IV. Create innovative financing instruments to fund and sustain the sanitation movement; and
- V. Develop capacities within the government to plan, implement and monitor sanitation programmes

23. Please do keep these five themes in mind as you discuss, over the coming four days, pathways to achieving holistic sanitation and inculcating in every individual the sense of civic behaviour that would allow us to maintain cleanliness in our surroundings. I am confident that the sessions and proceedings of this Convention will result in actionable ideas and in a powerful statement towards our combined resolve to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, and particularly SDG 6. With those words I wish all of you, the delegates and participants at the Mahatma Gandhi International Sanitation Convention, the very best in your noble and history-making mission.

Thank you

Jai Hind!

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