

Special Feature – “Swachhta Hi Sewa”Pakhwada

Gandhi Jayanti Swachh Bharat Diwas



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Public sanitation was a subject about which Mahatma Gandhi was deeply interested throughout his life. Gandhi devoted a great deal of time to instilling in Indians an appreciation of the importance of sanitation and tried to rouse the Nation's consciousness on this vital issue. It is important to note Gandhi's published works devote significant attention to the cause of public sanitation, on parity with his focus on Satyagraha, Ahimsa and Khadi.

Gandhi's vision of an ideal village was one with perfect sanitation, village lanes and streets free of all avoidable dust. In his book "*Ashram Observances in Action*", Gandhi writes that sanitary service is an essential and sacred service and yet it is looked down upon in society, with the result that it is generally neglected and affords considerable scope for improvement. The Ashram laid emphasis on engaging no outside labor for this work. The members themselves attend in turns to the whole of the sanitation. The Ashram designed simple, easy to use latrines that did not require a scavenger to clean. The Sevagram Ashram rules laid down that it was necessary that inmates must wash their hands with pure earth and pure water and wipe them with a clean napkin.

Public Sanitation has been accorded significant importance in Gandhi's life in South Africa. In his book "*Satyagraha in South Africa*", he describes his life on Tolstoy Farm - "The spring was about 500 yards away from our quarters and the water had to be fetched on carrying poles. Here we insisted that we should not have any servants... Everything therefore from cooking to scavenging was done with our own hands...The lion like Thambi Naidoo was in charge of sanitation...In spite of the large number of settlers, one could not find refuse or dirt anywhere on the farm. All rubbish was buried in trenches sunk for the purpose ...A small spade is the means of salvation from a great nuisance."

In his book “*My Experiments with Truth*” Gandhi writes, plague broke out in Bombay in 1897 and there was panic all around. Gandhi offered his services to the State in the sanitation department. Gandhi laid special emphasis on inspection of latrines and carrying out improvements. In his inspections of untouchables’ quarters Gandhi found that they were beautifully smeared with cow dung and the few pots and pans were clean and shining. There was no fear of an outbreak in those quarters. Gandhi also records that he visited the Vaishnava Haveli, and was pained to see uncleanliness about a place of worship. He knew that the authors of the Smritis had laid the greatest emphasis on cleanliness both inward and outward. Gandhi further notes that sanitation was a difficult affair in penetrating Indian villages. The people were not ready to do their own scavenging. Gandhian volunteers concentrated their energies on making villages ideally clean, they swept the roads and the courtyards, cleaned out the wells, filled the pools and persuaded the villagers to raise volunteers from amongst themselves.

Gandhi sensed a relation between poor sanitation and practice of untouchability. People neglected sanitation because it was considered to be the responsibility of the ‘untouchables’. Gandhi felt that untouchability must be abolished and at the same time the conditions of public sanitation must be improved. Gandhi repeatedly forbade his followers from hiring anyone from the so-called lower castes for sanitary work. Gandhi felt that once the ‘untouchables’ whom he christened Harijans – children of God, were freed from the occupation of scavenging, their rise to a position of equality with others in the society would be facilitated. Following independence, untouchability was abolished by law. Gandhi’s vision is embellished in the Fundamental Rights – Article 17 which proclaims abolition of ‘Untouchability’ and forbids its practice in any form. The enforcement of any disability arising out of “Untouchability” shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law. The principal object of Article 17 is to ban untouchability in any form.

In 2017, the Government is celebrating Gandhi Jayanti - October 2 as Swachh Bharat Diwas. Government is also celebrating September 15, 2017 to October 2, 2017 for the Swachhata Hi Sewa campaign to mark the third anniversary of the Swachh Bharat Mission to provide an impetus to the largest sanitation campaign of India. The Swachh Sarvekshan conducted in several States on the impact of the Swachh Bharat Mission brought forth several success stories in 3 years of implementation – complete behavioral changes in people to keep villages clean and use toilets, people selling family jewels to construct household toilets, vanar senas of children blowing whistles and accosting people at 5 am to prevent open defecation and significant improvement in school enrolment through the Swachh Bharat Mission. The Swachh Bharat Mission has become a massive peoples movement.

Come, let us celebrate Gandhi Jayanti October 2, 2017 with the Gandhian ideals of public sanitation for a Swachh Bharat.

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For Gandhi Non-violence was akin to Swachhta

Birth Anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi: 2nd October

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For Gandhi Non-violence was akin to Swachhta

***Sudhirendar Sharma**

India's decisive battle against cleanliness and hygiene has got a fillip through 'Swachhta Hi Seva', Cleanliness is Service, which draws attention to making sanitation a shared responsibility. Embedded in the idea of this top-up initiative to the already ongoing 'Swachh Bharat Mission' (SBM) is a clear invocation for the masses to shun the entrenched notion that cleanliness is but the task of the 'others' who have historically been performing it on behalf of the rest of 'us'.

Nothing could be closer to the Mahatma who on numerous occasions in his checkered life had demonstrated a clear but distinct relationship between sanitation and service, by presenting himself as a living example that 'everyone be his own scavenger'. Convinced that he will not allow 'anyone walk through his mind with their dirty feet', Gandhi had held the broom firmly in his hands through his life without missing a single occasion to extend his 'service as a scavenger'.

From the Phoenix in South Africa to Sewagram in India, Gandhi's ashrams were lived-in examples of what service meant in the quest for cleanliness. More than an act in symbolism, cleanliness was perceived as a noble service in which all the *ashramites* used to engage on a daily basis. It is evident that for the Father of the Nation the service for *swachhta* was a social tool that he used to cut across class and caste barriers that hindered cleanliness. It has continued to remain relevant till this day.

However, it is intriguing how the Mahatma had kept alive his message of cleanliness throughout his non-violent crusade for attaining freedom. Even during the ultimate test of his idea and practice of non-violence following the Noakhali massacre, which had accounted for the lives of 5,000 people in the worst communal riots before independence, Gandhi had not missed out an opportunity to convey the message that sanitation and non-violence were two faces of the same coin.

One day during the peace mission through the troubled areas in Noakhali he encountered filth and dirt deliberately strewn on the unpaved street aimed at thwarting his march to spread his message of peace among the affected populace. Not deterred by it, the Mahatma used it as an opportunity to do what only he could do. Pulling some twigs from nearby bushes and converting it into brooms, the apostle of peace and non-violence had swept the street of its opposition, from inciting further violence.

For him 'a healthy mind in a healthy body' was not a physical manifestation but a deep-rooted philosophical message. Could an individual harbor non-violent thought if his actions were violent towards nature and fellow beings? That cleanliness was viewed as an integral part of his political campaign for freedom, there is little doubt that lack of cleanliness was clearly equated to an act of violence. It indeed is as lack of hygiene continues to cause death to millions of children in the country.

No wonder, lack of sanitation remains an invisible killer. Manifest in it is the worst form of violence, Gandhi had long perceived. Therefore sanitation was made an uncontested metaphor for non-violence, a co-traveler in the quest for both social and political freedom. Having observed scrupulous rules about cleanliness in the west, Gandhi could not resist applying the same in his life, and in the lives of millions who followed him. Much of his work remains unfinished, though.

"I learnt years ago that a lavatory must be as clean as a drawing-room", Gandhi had once remarked. Taking his learning to a higher level, Gandhi had made his toilet (in his ashram in Sewagram at Wardha) literally a place of worship - cleanliness is close to godliness. Only by elevating it to the high pedestal can the value of a toilet be understood by the masses. This calls for a significant shift in our perception of living amidst filth, wherein sanitation has remained more of an exception than a norm.

The ambitious target of making the country open defecation free by October 2, 2019 is the first step in that direction, and a formidable undertaking in giving a functional toilet each to over 50 million households in the country. However, converting a 'toilet movement' into a 'social movement' wherein actual toilet usage becomes a norm will call for pulling lessons from the life of Gandhi. Among other factors, reluctance of villagers to clean toilets and empty sewage pits remains a socio-cultural taboo.

No one could foresee this problem more than Gandhi himself. Kasturba had once expressed her disgust when asked to carry and clean the chamber-pots. Gandhi had rebuked her and told her to leave the house if she wanted not to observe the practice of being a scavenger herself. In doing so, Gandhi had expressed a violent behaviour *albeit* for a short moment, to inculcate the greater value of non-violence through an act of cleanliness. In many ways, *swachhta* to him was akin to non-violence or sometimes perhaps above it.

This small but significant episode from the life of Gandhi harbors a valuable message. By practicing it through the rest of her life, Kasturba had inadvertently demonstrated *Swachhta Hi Vyavhaar*, Cleanliness is Behaviour. It could be the message for the top-up campaign next year. After all, it is the behavioural change that SBM is trying to inculcate amongst millions.

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