

CHAPTER 4

Swachh Bharat Abhiyan and M.K. Gandhi: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party Government launched the *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* on Mahatma Gandhi's birth anniversary on October 2, 2014 with the objective of making India open defecation free by 2019. Open defecation by 53 percent of Indian population is a major cause of communicable infectious diseases like typhoid, cholera, hepatitis, malnutrition, stunted growth etc. India will thus also address the 6th goal of the United Nation's Seventeen Sustainable Development Goals. *Swachhata* is a central tenet of Gandhi's personal as well as social philosophy. It is one of the 13, later 18 points of Gandhi's famous constructive programme written during an interval between his active agitational politics of *Satyagrahas*. Gandhi once went to the extent of saying that sanitation was more important than independence. Gandhi's constructive programmes included communal unity, removal of untouchability, prohibition of liquor, Khadi, village sanitation, basic education or *Nai Taleem*, adult education, women, knowledge of health and hygiene, provincial languages, economic equality, *Kisans*, labour, *Adivasis*, lepers and students. Modi Government's *Abhiyan* is a well organised mission which is explained in a number of documents released on this occasion. Its time empirical studies are undertaken to evaluate the success and failure of this ongoing programme.

Keywords: *Open defecation, Swachhata, Satyagraha, Sustainable Development Goals*

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INTRODUCTION

The Indian government under Narendra Modi, while addressing the sixth goal of the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals, launched a special Cleanliness Mission or *Swachhata Abhiyan* on the anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi's birth on October 2, 2014, with the target of making India open-defecation-free by 2019. The logo of the mission which includes the spectacles that Gandhi wore, bridged by a tricolour is an indicative of the country and its citizens coming together to achieve the goal walking in the Mahatma's path. The present government looks at Gandhian thought as an unfinished project which never realised its full potential. Moreover, making Gandhi a part of the mission also gives political legitimacy to the idea and to the government. Such a grass-roots initiative was essential because data suggests that 53 percent of the Indian population was defecating in the open in 2013 (53 percent Indian Households, 2019). Open defecation is a major cause of various diseases like, diarrhoea, intestinal infections, typhoid, cholera, hepatitis, malnutrition, and child stunting among others (Cooper, 2019).

Swachhata was central to Gandhi's personal or individual philosophy as well as social or collective philosophy. He regarded it essential not only for good health but also for social health. He went to the extent of asserting that 'Sanitation is more important than independence'. Perhaps the most important primary source to study his ideas on *swachhata* is the text of *Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place*. It was written during a period of respite or retreat from active politics or between the period between his 1921-1922 non-cooperation movement and the 1931 Quit India Movement. The thirteen points of this programme were: Communal unity, Removal of untouchability, Prohibition, Khadi, Village sanitation, *Nai Taleem* or Basic Education, Adult Education, Women, Knowledge of health and hygiene, Provincial language, National language, Economic inequality, *Kisans*, Labour, *Adivasis*, Lepers, and Students (Gandhi, 1945). These 18 points of his constructive programme were his framework for the new India he wished to see after *Swaraj*. However, if we dwell deeper into his philosophies, we can find a number of discrepancies and dissonance between what he believed and what he preached. For instance, while Gandhi

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resorted to Satyagraha and non-cooperation for almost every idea he stood against, he never used the said tactics for a fight against caste atrocities. Vidhu Verma in *Gandhi and the Contemporary World* says, “A strong critique of Gandhi has emerged from Dalit perspectives that his efforts to address caste inequality seem to be efforts at evasion. He is viewed as leaving terms like ‘swaraj’ or ‘self-rule’ delightfully vague so that it was everything for everybody without disturbing anybody. The civil disobedience movements were ways of ruthlessly manipulating the less powerful sections of society to achieve goals specific to the bourgeoisie. The *Harijan Seva Sangh*, which worked for the upliftment of scheduled castes, were to propound upper-caste norms related to food, nutrition, hygiene and sanitation” (Verma, 2020, p. 114). It is no secret that Gandhi’s ideas on untouchability and the caste system have a number of discrepancies, be it his own prejudices against the untouchables where he has on several occasions refused to eat with them or eat anything offered by them or be it not doing anything as vehemently for their upliftment as he did for denying them separate electorates. This disharmony between Gandhi’s ideas and actions was highlighted by Dr Ambedkar a number of times. At one occasion, he said, “Before Mahatma Gandhi, no politician in this country maintained that it is necessary to remove social injustice here in order to do away with tension and conflict, and that every Indian should consider it his sacred duty to do so. However, if we look closely, one finds there is a slight disharmony for he does not insist on the removal of untouchability as much as he insists on the propagation of Khaddar or the Hindu Muslim unity. If he had he would have made the removal of untouchability a precondition of voting, in the party. Well, be there as it may, when one is spurned by everyone, even the sympathy shown by Mahatma Gandhi is of no little importance” (Puri, 2020, pp. 129-130). While these arguments hold a factor of truth in them, at the same time, one can also not deny that except for Gandhi, there were not many who stood in such staunch opposition of the practice of untouchability. He did make a strong case against it, but how much he actually did for their upliftment can be left for one’s own understanding.

Further, one way of looking at Gandhi’s determination of upholding hereditary occupation can be ensuring dignity of labour. For instance, if I am born in a family of carpenters and I want to continue in the trade, it should be an empowered and informed choice. My labour should not be stigmatised and all conditions of social security should be present. The intersection of caste and poverty has to be removed. Once class improves, there is a certain space to reimagine one’s life,

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social discrimination remains but it is not killing. However, at the same time, the fact of the matter remains that the scavengers and sanitation workers were and are not happy with the work they are made to do. Perhaps, Gandhi stood for the dignity of labour in theory but his theoretical studies had no meaning since they have no implication for social and personal action. With the dignity of labour, there should have also been an idea of freedom of labour. Freedom to choose the occupation one wants to follow and whichever occupation one chooses must come with a dignity attached to it.

There is no doubt that Gandhi was a fanatic for cleanliness. Perhaps, taking cue from his undying insistence on cleanliness, the present Modi government had made it a major programme of its policy of development with the motif of Gandhi's typical spectacles. Sanitation and defecation free zones are a Civilization idea. It defines what it means to be human as opposed to nature. This Abhiyan was also a vision of an India within the 21st century. It is a century of development and urban progress as far as the government is concerned. A defecation free India, a sanitised India is a step towards becoming a developed country. It is the vision that informs a country that is going to be the biggest economy and superpower in the near future. The Abhiyan was a well organised mission. The government released a number of documents laying out the exact guidelines to be followed, leaving no room for confusion but at the same time, left barely any space for changes or improvement. Nevertheless, the idea of hiring volunteers or *swachhagrahis* for the Abhiyan was an exceptional move since these *swachhagrahis* were mostly young. This younger generation is mostly free from generational prejudices and gave a fresh outlook to the achievement of goals. In addition to *swachhagrahis*, the government also took help from Accredited Social Health Activists or ASHA workers who contributed a great deal to the Abhiyan in terms of educating the village folk. They helped in communicating with the women in villages explaining what ill effects the practice of open defecation can have on them as well as their young children and how open defecation can make them a victim of violent sexual crimes.

The timeline of the Abhiyan made it stand apart from earlier, rather slow-paced initiatives. Although the five-year timeline was an ambitious but also a bold one. It definitely resulted in a number of households being left out of the ambit but it also helped in rushing the process of construction of toilets which proved to be advantageous for those who were willing to use it. Also, making the progress of the mission a part of popular media, helped in familiarising it to the masses.

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For instance, acknowledgement and appreciation of swachhata tasks done on the popular Hindi television show '*Taarak Mehta ka Ooltah Chashmah*' every week, did wonders in reaching a large audience and familiarise people with the mission, not only in India but abroad.

The government may have succeeded in constructing lakhs of toilets but it has failed on a number of aspects. First, while the government picked up on Gandhi's idea of *swachhata*, it failed to pick up another equally important aspect, that of the sanitation workers. While Gandhi may not have done a thing to free the sanitation workers of their menial and hazardous job, a job which was and still is forced upon them, he did try to elevate their position in the society and did demand respect for their jobs. Although, the sanitation workers are never asked if they want to do the job, they are simply hired and many do not even have the luxury of saying no as an answer because of two reasons: one, being occupied in such a low paying job with no social security, barely ever left them with the kind of finances that could have allowed them to educate themselves for a better job and two, because stronger forces of society can threaten them if they refuse. Perhaps, the government did not feel the need to revise The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013. The act might have helped in improving the condition of the sanitation workers but the government evidently overlooked the fact that it did not do so entirely and the practice continues till date taking a number of innocent lives. With no way to feed themselves and their families, they have no option but to crawl back in the same hell hole, literally and metaphorically. Thus, it becomes clear that the *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* relates to Gandhian political thought and action only to bring Gandhi's name to the fore to establish a legitimacy and an emotional appeal, beyond that, nothing. Governments have time and again overlooked the fact that this evil social practice will not come to an end until and unless there is a fundamental change in the mindset of the people. This brings us to the second and interconnected reason why the Abhiyan could not entirely succeed. This is the same mistake that the Modi government has made yet again when it comes to the *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan*. The government has failed to incorporate a behavioural change among the people resulting in people defecating in the open even after having toilets at home. People with toilets at home are using them as store rooms or laundry rooms. This is mainly due to the fact that a number of people connect toilets and defecation as being inherently dirty. That is why, they are not very comfortable with having a toilet at home where they live, eat, sleep, and pray. This very understanding ends up making a collateral damage that has a direct



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impact on how those who are entrusted with the task of cleaning toilets are seen. Since defecation is regarded as something dirty, those who clean toilets or empty pits or man-holes are regarded the same. Then what would be more convenient than to pick the one caste that is the lowest in the hierarchy. A hierarchy probably redesigned to suit the needs or hide the illusions of an ill-informed part of the population. The mission does not address the issue of the poor treatment of those who handle the garbage or do the cleaning. Especially during the pandemic when they were not even provided with safety gears to work in a place as contagious as a hospital, let alone other places. It simply wants to keep the country clean without any due regard to those who do it and have been doing it, probably since the onset of Hinduism.

While this was a social issue that should have been addressed decades ago, the recent one with regard to the use of toilets has also been left more or less at the periphery. It is no news that the reason behind lakhs of Indians not using toilets is not the absence of it but a traditional mindset. What prevents them from not using toilets is not always their financial condition but their poorly informed minds as discussed just now. Such a problem does not necessarily call for a monetary solution but one that focuses primarily on educating the masses. At the same time, I do not mean to imply that giving incentives is bad idea. It is a good one, provided it is actually given. For instance, in *Understanding Open Defecation in the Age of Swachh Bharat Abhiyan: Agency, Accountability, and Anger in Rural Bihar*, the researchers have pointed out that many households do not construct toilets because they doubt if they will ever receive the incentive from the government. Moving on, the third reason is that, toilets are constructed in the homes of those who never use it and those who wish to are left without it due to lack of money. As a result, a number of Indians still practice open defecation. The reasons are many: the problem of mindset as I have already discussed; the condition of the toilets that are constructed which I shall discuss in the following section; and the absence of toilets. The absence of toilets connects us to the fourth factor leading to the failure of the Abhiyan, that of the haste the government was in to declare India open defecation free. In this rush, the government left behind the poor of India, the slum-dwellers. The slums of Delhi do not have access to toilets and merely providing them with one mobile toilet is not going to do the trick. In an area where hundreds are living, one single toilet or for that matter ten toilets are going to be of no help because the rest are going to resort to defecating in the open because neither do they have the resources to construct a toilet by themselves nor do they have any other option. There is no way one

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can solve such a problem except to provide each family with their own toilet and if possible, decent living conditions. This rush to declare India open defecation free also ended up in many houses being left out of data and records either intentionally or unintentionally. At times the government picked old records and at times they deliberately took in a lesser number than there actually is. Also, the criteria for a place to be declared open defecation free is problematic. It requires every household to have a toilet and there must not be any sight of human faeces in the open. Now this is extremely bogus because these can in no way determine whether toilets are being used or people are still defecating in the open. It has been enumerated time and again that construction of toilets does not mean their use. It is false to assume so and award the title of open defecation free. Further, this is a continuous process with new houses being built every other day. Moreover, one can never be sure about someone who has never used a toilet will wake up one day to do so. In a country where many have been aloof from the idea of using toilets for centuries, merely constructing one cannot guarantee that they will use them. This is a flawed criteria and one that is probably designed to haphazardly declare the country open defecation free to meet the unrealistic deadline set by the Prime Minister. Fifth, it must also be noted that Swachh Bharat Abhiyan was not an original idea that came up independently of earlier missions. The mission has many similarities and is technically an extension of the erstwhile Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan which had nothing to do with the current Prime Minister, therefore, giving all the credit to Prime Minister Modi for it is not correct. There is no need to oversell the leadership but probably this is something that the current government is guilty of doing at every opportunity it gets.

Lastly, it is also of equal importance to emphasise on the condition and quality of toilets constructed. A number of 'beneficiaries' complain about the deplorable conditions of the toilets, some have their roofs on the verge of collapsing, some community toilets always have a lock on them, some are filthy because there is no one authorised to clean them. This results from a half-hearted task where the authorities are only concerned with the number of toilets constructed to put on paper. They prefer quantity over quality and that is only with one motive, that to meet the deadline without actually ensuring that the goals of the mission are met. Also, is the problem of the use of the term beneficiary. Prime Minister Modi in May 2016 said, "The Swachh Bharat Mission is a people's movement for cleanliness. The biggest beneficiaries of this movement are the poorest of the poor" (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 2021, p. 15). People have a right to sanitation

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and thus a right to have a toilet. When labelled as a beneficiary, they lose their right to hold the state accountable for not providing them with the concerned service (Cullet, et al., 2019).

There was a lot more to be done but by declaring India free of open defecation, the government has declared its work done. The only thing they are concerned about now is to keep up with this facade because those in power will never point out the real issue and those with real issues have never been able to voice their opinions because who actually listens? To summarise, I have reached on the conclusion that while it is true that many have quit the practice of open defecation and they are happily and convincingly using toilets and encouraging others to do so as well but there are a number of areas where the government can work more diligently. The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan might not have succeeded entirely but it has to some extent, brought a few changes here and there. The correct way to proceed should be to extend the mission with a focus majorly on bringing about a change in mindset and behaviour and not just on numbers. Also, the incentive promised must be handed over along with some social security measures like health benefits to convince the people. This rebel against the age-old practice of open defecation must be done with patience. The point should not have been giving ourselves the tag of being free of open-defecation but getting rid of this practice in the real sense of the term. Instead, the Abhiyan was reduced merely to elite photos. Another way to bring about a change can be through debate and deliberation, especially in villages, where people can discuss about the appropriate way to proceed and what kind of toilets would they be comfortable in using. Probably, if they are made a part decision making, they will feel like it is their own decision instead of a decision being imposed on them.

I would like to end with the quote that someone rightly pointed out, “When you are accustomed to privilege, equality feels like oppression” (Colantuono, n.d.) and perhaps due to the fear of losing this privilege, we as a nation, have not been able to bring about any concrete change in either the status of open defecation or in the condition of the sanitation workers.

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