



Long walk Doubts remain about the quality of toilet construction under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, particularly in terms of water sources and disposal methods AM FARUQUI

STATES OF MATTER

A not-so-clean account

The death of two children killed for relieving themselves in public just days before India was declared 'open defecation free' highlights the chasm between targets and solutions



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India was declared 'open defecation free' on October 2, Mahatma Gandhi's 150-year birth anniversary. A target-oriented sanitation drive, the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA) was a signature programme of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first term in office. Rapid achievements were among many claims made as he campaigned in 2019 for a second term.

In anticipation of the mission accomplished claim, just about a week before the significant Gandhi anniversary, Modi announced at his Houston rally with expatriate Indians in the US that all targets had been achieved. He took a victory lap through New York to pouch the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Award in recognition of his contributions to rural sanitation.

Numerical targets, as observers of India's development plans would recognise, are only the beginning of the story. The greater challenge is in sustainability through potentially adverse circumstances. Around the time that Modi was receiving his award, two young children were beaten to death in Bhavkhedi village in Shivpuri district of Madhya Pradesh, for the alleged crime of defecating in the open. That the two children were born in the Valmiki community, ascribed the task of waste disposal in the Indian caste hierarchy, made this an especially poignant incident.

Human wastes and garbage, it has been said, are where privacy ends and the public sphere begins. The toilet is where the human being is separated from the wastes generated in bodily functioning. To effect this separation in a fashion that is sustainable over time, the toilet has to have reliable linkages inwards of water, and outwards into secure faecal disposal.

The public space is also where notions of ritual purity and pollution under that unique institution, the caste system, come into play. It is a world of power relations, where status is associated with the ability to go about one's daily routines without the polluting contact

of human waste.

Sanitation functions in the industrialised countries were initially carried out through the convenience of banishment from view. As this process of "externalising" the problem was shown up as a mode of escapism, the logic of industrialism was extended to the process. Personnel dealing with this sector of the industrial economy came to enjoy the prestige of technicians. At a later phase, the more intimate contact points with waste were assigned to the exclusive care of immigrants from erstwhile colonies.

In an economy going through a slow and fractured process of modernisation, the manual interface remains wider and more persistent. And in its persistence, it also serves to underline the sustenance of privilege, of established systems of power that refuse to yield to the putatively egalitarian logic of modernity.

Creating the modern hierarchies of waste was about assembling several pieces from a fragmenting social reality. As Vijay Prashad documents in his 2000 book *Untouchable Freedom*, it was about bringing classes dispossessed by agrarian change during colonial times into a functional relationship with a modernising economic order, typified by a division of labour. It was also about accommodating strata that performed menial tasks in the older, crumbling, urban courts into the newer relations of social reproduction.

Patron-client relations that defined the older order were dismantled in favour of a formal relationship of contract for the new classes, now endowed with the professional appellation of "sweeper". But typically for a fractured process, recruitment into the newly formalised jobs were contracted through older power hierarchies. The variety of castes and sub-castes thrown into this melting pot of

the administrative state, created a common identity for themselves. Maharishi Valmiki was the chosen preceptor and his veneration became a marker of the new collective identity. The myth of origin was about carving out a niche within an older ritual hierarchy, and the assumption of a collective identity, about securing a place within the modern civic order.

According to media reports (names changed to protect identities), Bablu Valmiki, father of the 10-year-old boy and brother of the 12-year-old girl lynched at Bhavkhedi, moved to the village 20 years ago after negotiations with local power groups, underwritten by a cash transaction. Though entitled to daily wages of ₹100, he was forced to settle for ₹50, though in one sign of assimilation, he was granted the right to play the *dhapli*, a tambourine-like instrument, in local festivities.

That symbolism did not bring with it any substantive benefit. Bablu's application for funds to build a toilet under the SBA was

rejected by the local panchayat. When drawing water from common village sources, his turn comes up last, often after a wait of two hours. And his 12-year-old daughter, since dropping out, earns a modest daily wage cleaning toilets at the local school.

Doubts remain about the quality of toilet construction under the SBA, particularly in terms of water sources and disposal methods that avoid the abuses of manual scavenging. Since the technocratic approach, marked by directives from higher quarters in the administrative hierarchy, often co-opts local power structures in the quest of targets, Swachh Bharat is nowhere near becoming egalitarian India.

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