

Swachh Bharat Abhiyan at Nine: Unearthing the Missing Link in Gandhi's Dream

By Vaishali Sharma - September 27, 2023



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-MAHATMA GANDHI

By Vaishali Sharma 28 September 2023

As I perused my monthly planner, my excitement grew upon discovering a long weekend on Monday, October 2nd. This day will commemorate the 153rd birthday of Mahatma Gandhi, the father of our nation whose ideals and visions continue to inspire generations. This prompted me to reflect on Gandhi's profound vision of cleanliness and sanitation and Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Campaign).

This year, October 2nd also marks the ninth anniversary of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Campaign), a movement initiated by our Honorable Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The campaign represents a modern realisation of Mahatma Gandhi's ideals pertaining to cleanliness and sanitation. Notably, it strives to transform villages into clean and hygienic communities while promoting rural self-reliance and dignity and upholding values of simplicity, community involvement and moral responsibility.

Inevitably, my thoughts transported me back to the memories of my field visits to certain villages in the district of Chanduali in Uttar Pradesh. These memories were etched with a blend of both joy and concern.

As my friend Neha and I embarked on our scooter rides to the villages of Chanduali, transversing the scenic roads cut through vast, picturesque green fields, we couldn't have anticipated the stark contrast that lay ahead. The lush green fields seemed to stretch endlessly, and the refreshing wind on our faces made our journey more enjoyable.

However, as we drew near to the heart of these villages, our joy began to fade, gradually replaced by a deep sense of sadness and helplessness. Within a radius of just 1 km from these villages, a disheartening reality unfolded before our eyes – open defecation, resulting in faecal pollution in the local water stream used for irrigating agricultural land. The scenic countryside was marred by human faeces, a testament to the long-standing practice of open defecation in Indian Villages.

Seeing this, as we further developed into these villages, our eyes were drawn to the village's infrastructure. The rural settlements before us were a revelation, organised in a way that felt almost like well-designed colonies, with neatly paved streets winding through their heart. Our attention was piqued by the distinct features of several villages where HDFC CSR projects were actively contributing to rural infrastructure development. It was heartening to witness the construction of schools, the careful laying of streets and the establishment of community toilets. Such improved infrastructure gave us a profound feeling that we are witnessing a tangible transformation aligning with the goals of the Swachh Bharat Mission (Gramin).

However, amid these encouraging developments, a few households drew our attention for different reasons. In some villages, we noticed that toilets had been constructed but left incomplete, lacking a ceiling and a door. Even more surprising was the discovery that instead of using toilets for their intended purpose, they had repurposed them as storage for wooden fuel and drying cow dung.

These contrasting scenarios during our visits to certain villages of Chanduali left me with lingering questions – What could we, as a collective, be inadvertently missing or neglecting in our efforts to embrace Gandhi's vision and attain Sampooran Swacchta, as envisioned through the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan? Unearthing the answer to this question is far from straightforward, given the intricacies inherent to Indian villages and their complex systems that involve interrelated factors encompassing diverse social and religious structures, entrenched behavioural norms, economic disparities, community engagement, government policies, etc. All these elements collectively contribute to shaping the distinctive sanitation landscape of each village.

Half a decade ago, India marked a significant milestone when it was declared an Open Defecation Free (ODF) nation, based on the considerable number of toilets built by government initiatives. Yet, this proclamation may not wholly reflect the present state of toilet usage in the country. The recently released Joint Monitoring Programme Report for the year 2022 by the WHO and UNICEF reveals that 17% (approximately 152.49 million people) of the rural population in India still practices open defecation. This data presents a significant disparity between the infrastructure built and its utilisation. This stark contrast between infrastructure development and practical usage strongly mirrors my personal experiences in the villages of Chanduali. While we witnessed initial strides in constructing sanitation facilities, it's now clear that sustaining these gains and instigating behavioural change is equally pivotal in achieving Gandhi's dream of a Clean India.

So, what are the possible ways forward in achieving Gandhi's vision? The journey towards Sampoorna Swacchta entails a multifaceted approach, embodying the wisdom of Mahatma Gandhi's words:

"Cleanliness is not just a habit, but it's a way of life."

While we all understand that change is inevitable, at the same time, we find difficulty in breaking our old patterns and habits. Open defecation is also a pattern and habit among many rural communities that needs to be changed into a habit of using toilets and thereby becomes the way of their sustainable livelihood. Therefore, instead of solely counting the number of toilets constructed, it necessitates a more profound commitment from diverse stakeholders, including

different levels of government, N.G.O.s, and community leaders, to elevate villages to the status of Sampooran Swachh communities.

To embark on this transformation, it is imperative that we first comprehend the complex nature of rural settings, acknowledging their geographical, social, and cultural diversities. With this understanding, our focus should be on these critical elements of Sampooran Swachhta – fostering behavioural change, embracing cultural sensitivity, ensuring inclusivity, and prioritising sustainability. (i) Firstly, to drive behaviour change, the engagement of local N.G.O.s and community leaders is essential as they can effectively mobilise and empower the community. Using movies or short videos to raise awareness of multiple diseases that can result from facial pollution is a powerful approach, as these visual aids effectively convey the consequences of unsanitary practices and, in turn, motivate to change their old habits. (ii) Secondly, Cultural Sensitivity involves customising sanitation and hygiene initiatives to harmonise with specific customs and traditions of local communities. It, therefore, encompasses active collaboration with community members to devise culturally relevant and efficient solutions. (iii) Thirdly, the dimension of inclusivity needs to be examined thoroughly, which involves the specific needs of the women, differently abled and children. This comprehensiveness ensures that sanitation programs are not only accessible but also equitable, leaving no one behind and fostering a sense of dignity and equality for all. (iv) Last and most importantly, is to ensure the sustainability of projects taken under Swachh Bharat Abhiyan. Sustainability is all about creating lasting and enduring change. It not only includes maintaining and preserving sanitation infrastructure but also includes developing innovative approaches for sustainable livelihood.

With this, I also hold the hope of realising Gandhi’s vision of a Clean India, where our villages transform into self-reliant and empowered villages. I have faith in witnessing this transformation with our collective efforts. Eagerly, I anticipate more amazing scooter rides alongside my friend Neha, where our journey unfolds, revealing vibrant and contented communities thriving amidst lush green fields.

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