



Swatch Bharath Abhiyan - obstacles in rural India

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Abstract

The swatch Bharath Mission (SBM) launched by the government of India on 2 October 2014 has a noble objective of making India cleaner by improving the sanitation conditions by in the country. The mission has two major sub-missions, rural and urban focused on sanitation improvement in rural and urban areas respectively. The mission has the target of achieving total sanitation by 2019 and to make India cleaner and healthier for its people. But Indian government failed in achieving the goals of this mission. In this paper I will analyze the causes for the failure of swatch Bharath in rural India and its remedies. First, I will mainly focus on the plights of manual scavenging, and I try to explain how public policies such as swatch Bharath failed take into account socially evil practices such as untouchability and the continuation of manual scavenging based on the caste identity. My analysis of swatch Bharath's failure in rural India is twofold, the first one is the prominence of the idea of pollution and purity and untouchability practice in rural India and the economic burden on poor families to construct toilets, this led to the continuation of open defecation in rural India.

Keywords: Swatch Bharat, Manual scavenging, Dalit labor, Civil society, Pollution-Purity, Open defecation, Indus valley civilization

Introduction

Swatch Bharath Abhiyan-perpetuating manual scavenging

The group of authors in their article, "Silencing caste, sanitizing oppression: understanding Swatch Bharath Abhiyan", they explained the inextricable relation between the Hindu notions of purity and pollution, and its link with the caste system and the practice of untouchability. Here, we can understand how the swatch Bharath Program is failed to address the problem of manual scavenging and at the same time the practice of untouchability in rural India is one of the major reasons why this initiative failed in rural spaces. These beliefs perpetuate the oppression of the polluted castes, who are forced to undertake manual scavenging, unclog manholes and clear other people's filth. The availability of cheap Dalit labour to do these dehumanizing jobs can be cited as one of the reasons why development of toilet facilities and a modern garbage and sewage system have been neglected so far. As long as the swatch Bharath Abhiyan attempts to delink the relationship between caste and sanitization, it's difficult to achieve the aims of swatch Bharath mission. Authors, argued that the rhetoric of swatch Bharath failed in capturing the complex relation between swatch Bharath program on one side and the continuation of manual scavenging on the basis of caste identity on the other hand. Here, I will explain the plights of manual scavenging communities and how the swatch Bharath initiative completely neglects this aspect.

Infact ,the thrust of the campaign appeared to project a samras(harmonious) picture of our society ,where cleanliness or the lack of it was connected with our kartavya(duty) towards Bharath Mata(mother India).The oath administered by the prime minister to everyone who

joined the campaign was "Now, it's our duty to serve mother India by removing dirt).simple slogans definitely look attractive or catchy ,but there is always a possibility that they fail to capture larger complex reality and perpetuate historical asymmetric, injustices and varied forms of casteism.

Manual scavengers have little or no education. Without expectation, all of them despise their work. they are completely ignored or looked down upon with disgust by the rest of the society. they have to work in the midst of filth, with no protective gear not even access to water to wash of the slime. Most of them are alcoholics and live in poverty, in dismissal housing...The workers abuse their wives and children. And when the husband die, the despised job passes to the widows. The despair continues."

City sewers or death traps?

Indian media is always remained silent over the deaths of manual scavengers. It also mentioned why none of the safari karmacharis, were ever provided elementary tools such as rope, box ,oxygen cylinder ,mask ,etc, at the tiem of descending into the gutters.

In 2007,siriyanyan anand did a story in Tehelka titled "Life inside a black Hole", where he discussed how "Beaneath the glitter of India are dark alleys in which are trapped poisonous gases and millions of Dalits who do our dirty job in return for disease and untouchability. It also underlined the fact that most of the workers who work in sewers die before retirement. The average lifespan of a manhole worker is about 45 years. If a worker does not die inside a manhole due to illness contracted while doing job, then there is no monetary compensation. In developed countries, manhole workers are provided with proper safety equipment before they descend into the gutter. But in

India “India’s urban planners, designers and technologists have never felt the need to conceive a human-friendly system of managing garbage and sewage. Instead, they rely on an unending source of disposal, cheap, Dalit labour”.

Why there is no response from civil society towards the plight of scavengers?

The only “explanation “possible for this state of affairs is that caste and related discriminations have become so common and ingrained in our psyche that nobody finds anything abominable. Perhaps this unique system of hierarchy-legitimised by the wider society and sanctified by religion -which has condemned a section of its own people to the profession of cleaning ,sweeping and scavenging ,has become part of our thinking. It is a reflection of the deeper malaise afflicting the country, has half of its population defecating in the open and lakhs of its population defecating in the open and lakhs of people still engaged in the profession of shit collection. In fact, we have designated communities who have been forced into this dehumanizing profession since centuries.

A short film by young director p amudhan,from southern India had made a film entitled,” Vande Matarm – A shit version”had AR Rahmans popular song “Vande Mataram”,playing back in the background,while a women manual scavenging from madhurai went about performing her task.This music video was a conscious attempt to question the pseudo- patriotism of the people and a society which allows such heinous practices like scavenging on casteist lines.

Why the swatch Bharath failed to address the problem of manual scavengers?

civil society legitimized the caste occupations,when it comes to manual scavenging ,it treats it as the birth right of the Dalits to do the manual scavenging .Even our prime minister Modi, In his book “Karmayog”, calls this occupation as some kind of spiritual experience.”I do not believe that they have been doing this job just to sustain their livelihood.Had this been so ,they would not have continued with this type of job generation after generation...At some point of time,somebody must have got the enlightenment that it is their duties to work for the happiness of the entire society and the gods;that they have have to do this job bestowed upon them by gods;and that this job of cleaning up should continue as an internal spiritual activity for centuries.This should have continued generation after generation.It is impossible to to believe that their ancestors did not have the choice of adopting any other work or business.”

Barve committee formed in 1949 had even made the offensive suggestion that the scavengers do not consider their work dirty and in fact even blamed the victims.Prof.Vivek kumar argues, The attempt by modi to link the clean india mission to Gandhi is problematic.In a bid to draw legitimacy from Gandhi,his concerns have been misrepresented.One of Gandhi’s main concern was eradication of untouchability,which was directly related to sanitation work and thereby the caste system.Though Gandhi stressed on personal cleanliness and hygiene,he did not deny the caste-based nature of sanitation work.We should create an alternative discourse which can counter the

existing discourse which can challenge the caste based occupation system.

As I earlier mentioned, there is a close relationship between manual scavenging and caste and the invisibilizing the plights of manual scavengers under the rhetoric’s of swatch Bharath Abhiyan.Now I will deal with the second issue,why the open defecation is still existing in the rural india.

Open defecation in rural India-Obstacles to swatch Bharath mission

According to official figures, India happens to be the number one country as far as open defecation is concerned,Where more than 60 crore people have no sanitation facilities at home, and they either go out in the fields or use dry latrines to relieve themselves.

History of open defecation

People during the Harapan times had waterborne toilets in each house ,which were linked by drains covered by burnt clay bricks.This drainage system had manholes and chambers.But the science of sanitary engineering suffered a setback with the decline of the indus vally civilization.”From then on ,the toilets in india remained primitive and open defecation became rampant”

Geeta Ramaswamy makes important comments on open defecation

“In large parts of western world,the connection between human excreta and disease is well established.Human excreta is the principal vehicle for the transmission and spread of a wide range of communicable diseases...In India, excreta is seen as impure. Traditional practice has failed to keep up with scientific disposal of excreta, leading to skewed practices, particularly in the matter of having someone else to clean up behind us.Excreta avoidance is ritualized;the bath is taken after defecation...caste hindu society did not ever mind that public places were soiled by excreta but insisted that inside of the house should be free of excretions...Given such ritual avoidance of excreta and the reality that excreta cannot be avoided after all that excreta ,and the reality that excreta cannot be avoided after all ,caste hindus are not surprisingly,found the solution in polluted castes who would manually handle excreta.Scavenging and caste are thus intimately linked.

Understanding open defecation in rural India: Untouchability, pollution and latrine pits

In practice ,government programmes in rural india have paid little attention in understanding why so many rural Indians defecate in the open rather than use affordable pit latrines.Drawing on new data ,a study points out that widespread open defecation in rural india is on account of beliefs ,values and norms about purity and pollution ,caste and untouchability that cause people to reject affordable latrines.Future rural sanitation programmes must address villagers ideas about pollution ,pit-emptying,and untouchability and should do so in ways that accelerate progress towards social equality for Dalits rather than delay it.

Indias open defecation rates are indeed surprising :despite rapid economic growth ,improving literacy rates,and widespread access to improved water sources ,the 2011 census found that 70% of rural households do not have a toilet or latrine.widespread open defecation in rural India is

not attributable to relative material or educational deprivation but rather to beliefs, values and norms about purity, pollution, caste and untouchability that cause people to reject affordable latrines. We find that many people consider having and using a pit latrine ritually impure and also polluting. Open defecation, in contrast, is seen as promoting purity and strength, particularly by men, who typically decide how money is spent in rural households.

Rural people equate manual pit emptying with scavenging and other degrading forms of labour traditionally done by Dalits. Because of this, non-dalits refuse to empty their own latrine pits. Dalits, who were traditionally compelled by violence and poverty to do similar work, increasingly seek alternatives to the kinds of physically and ritually dirty jobs that have been used, for generations, to justify their oppression, exclusion and humiliation. Despite the frequent assumption of urban observers that rural Indians must find open defecation embarrassing or unpleasant, open defecation is not only socially acceptable in places where almost everyone does it, it is seen as wholesome activity that is associated with health, strength and masculine vigour. The kind of latrines that are built in rural India, and the people who are most likely to use them, reinforce open defecation among many poor.

Pit emptying- Obstacle to Swachh Bharath

Mechanical emptying of these pits is impractical because the pit is designed for water to seep out and for faeces to become compacted. A sewage truck operator explained that if he wanted to use a mechanical pump to empty a soak pit, he would need to put water into the pit to suck out the sewage. This would be messy and would cause him to interact more closely with faeces than if he were sucking the sewage from a cemented tank. Further, affordable latrines are often built in places that are difficult for sewage trucks to access. Finally, it is quite expensive to hire sewage trucks, which now almost exclusively operate in towns and cities, to suck small quantities of sludge from village latrine pits. For these reasons, soak pits around the world are emptied by hand. Emptying pits by hand is an unpleasant job that can be hazardous to health if emptying is done before the feces decompose. The Indian government and the WHO recommend that a pit be left unused for six months to decompose. Decomposed feces are safer to handle than fresh sludge; they do not transmit bacterial and viral infections. Under the law, hiring someone to empty a decomposed pit is not considered manual scavenging. The need to allow pits to decompose before emptying means that each latrine needs two pits.

However, prior and present rural sanitation programmes have unfortunately paid little attention to the reasons why villagers reject affordable pit latrines. The government provides pit latrines without any thought to how they will be emptied, or what the social consequences will be. As a start, the government must begin to connect rural sanitation policy with efforts to eliminate manual scavenging. Employing a manual scavenger, someone who cleans human feces by hand, was made illegal under the prohibition of employment as manual scavengers and their rehabilitation act in 1993. The act specifies that hiring someone to empty fresh sludge from a latrine pit constitutes manual-scavenging.

Conclusion: Solutions to open defecation in rural India

It is not that Swachh Bharath program totally failed in the rural India, it relatively succeeded. Rama Mohan in his article "Swachh Bharat Mission (Gramin)", explains the relative success of this initiative. He explains, the SBM (Gramin) has the primary task of building IHHS for the remaining 80.8 million households before Oct 2019, apart from improving solid and liquid waste disposal in its villages. Thus, at the current pace of progress, it appears that the mission achievement 100% coverage in rural areas is a difficult task. By March 2016, the mission completed its first 18 months of the total 60 months time frame set for achieving its target. As per census 2011, India has 16,78,26,730 rural households. Out of these, 67.3% rural households defecate in the open and only 35% have drinking water available within the premises. A record 17.6 million IHHS were built and the coverage of households increased 41% to 51% during the first 18 months of the SBM (Gramin).

The solution to open defecation is people in rural India should have built a twin-pit latrine and let the contents of the first pit decompose: hiring someone to empty a decomposed latrine pit is excluded from the definition of manual scavenging. This sanitized solution is technically feasible, but it is also deeply impractical. It does not account for the vast majority of existing and under-construction pit latrines that do not or will not have two pits. More importantly, it does not address the social consequences of pit emptying.

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