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Sanitation Management in India and the Sulabh Movement

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I am sincerely grateful to honourable Professor Janat Shah, Director of the Indian Institute of Management, Udaipur, and other distinguished Members of the Programme Committee for inviting and giving me this pleasant opportunity to give the inaugural address to the fresh batch of Post Graduate Programme (PGP) students of this prestigious institute. I am delighted that I have to speak on a subject which has been at the centre of my longstanding social entrepreneurship. I have been working in the sanitation sector since 1968, and my mandate today is to hold forth on how to manage and overcome India’s huge sanitation deficit. Before I open up about the subject and share with this discerning audience some of my thoughts and experiences in this domain, I would like to suggest to our young PGP students and budding entrepreneurs assembled here that, like you, my journey of learning and striving for excellence still continues. Odds and adversities are part of our life, they test our competence and character, but the most important thing is chugging along and never giving up. As a seasoned traveller who has seen enough ups and downs of life, I would like to suggest to our young friends here, that there is more thrill in the journey than in reaching the destination.

Way back in 1970, when I was 27 year-old, I hesitantly laid the foundation stone of Sulabh to launch a movement for restoration of human rights and dignity to the scavenging dalits and ensuring sanitation and clean environment through a safe and hygienic human waste disposal system for millions of Indians who defecate in the open. At that time it seemed a mad venture, an impossible task, but because I persisted and refused to give up, Sulabh made the crucial breakthroughs at crucial times and achieved one success after another. I would like to draw your attention that Sulabh not only...

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constructed toilets but also innovated an environmentally safe and cost-effective two-pit, pour-flush, on-site compost toilet (which could easily be constructed from locally available materials and thus with minimum cost), which has been recognized as one of the best global technologies for safe disposal of human waste. Also, the Sulabh model of pay-and-use community toilets in urban centres and an effective mechanism of maintenance have proved successful all over India. How did we achieve all this while several similar ventures failed?

When I started my social and sanitation work, I came to realize that the best way to ensure public health, sanitation, human rights, women’s safety and other elements of human empowerment is to adopt a holistic approach because human and environmental problems do not exist in isolation but in close proximity. One problem is difficult to be resolved unless other problems are also resolved.

In this backdrop, I started my social work (after doing my graduation in sociology from Patna University) as a volunteer of the Bihar Gandhi Centenary Celebration Committee in 1968–69. This Committee, as a mark of centenary tribute to Mahatma Gandhi, had formed a cell with the objective of freeing the *Bhangis*—the group of untouchables (called scavengers in English), from their traditional occupation of cleaning and disposing human excreta and restoring their human rights and dignity. The Committee entrusted me to explore a better and hygienic scavenging system, preferably a safe and affordable toilet technology, and more dauntingly, to find a way to bring the scavengers in the social mainstream. I was utterly unprepared for such a challenge, but willy-nilly I accepted the assignment. In the beginning, I was confronted with two challenges: how to liberate and rehabilitate the scavengers; and, how to develop an effective and affordable toilet system (as an alternative to the expensive Western-style flush toilet and centralized water-borne sewage system) so that manual scavenging could be eliminated and scavenging untouchables freed and rehabilitated in other gainful occupation.

Traditionally no attention was paid to the occupational and environmental hazards of health associated with manual scavenging. This practice created not only large-scale environmental pollution and added to the burden of infectious diseases but also perpetuated social discrimination, especially the
vile practice of untouchability. I realized that no amount of advocacy and sensitization would remove the manual scavenging unless it is backed by a viable technology which ensures that no manual handling is required for disposal of excreta. An appropriate and affordable technology would also be the solution to the rampant menace of open defecation and environmental pollution. I was not an engineer or a scientist and thus not qualified at all to invent an appropriate toilet system, but I was impassioned to end the ugly practice of open defecation and injustice against the scavengers. I applied my mind, searched intensely, and with the help of a WHO handbook on the subject, I invented in 1968 a two-pit, pour-flush, on-site compost toilet (which could easily be constructed from locally available materials and thus with minimum cost). It was the technological tool to solve to the problems of manual scavenging as well as open defecation.

After this breakthrough, I founded Sulabh and struggled long and hard for the acceptance of Sulabh toilet technology in the community. But once the appropriateness and cost-effectiveness of the Sulabh toilet became clear to the people, the government and municipalities came around and decided to promote our toilet system. Spurred by this success, I developed the model of pay-and-use community toilets in urban centres, which became very popular, first in Bihar, and then across India. Gradually, Sulabh public and private toilets came all over the country. It has been a long and arduous journey from one small town (Arrah) in one state (Bihar) to 1,687 towns in 26 states and 4 Union Territories. Today, there are 1.5 million household Sulabh toilets and 8,500 public toilets in India. More than 20 million people use these facilities. Now, Sulabh has crossed over into Afghanistan, South East Asia, Africa and Latin America. Our concept and practice have received worldwide recognition and today many of the developing countries are replicating our model in their own country. It has been recognized by the UNDP as a global best practice, as a potential instrument for achieving millennium development goals for providing sanitation and human excreta disposal facilities to more than two billion people who have no such facilities.

Good sanitation is the basis of a civilized society and the lifeline of a healthy society, as it is vitally connected with our health and our security. There is need to see environmental sanitation as central to our civilization, as it provides the basic condition and foundation for human wellbeing. Mahatma Gandhi vividly made this point when he said during the freedom struggle that
cleanliness was more important than independence. The proclamation of Shri Narendra Modi after becoming Prime Minister that building toilets was a priority over temples was in sync with Gandhi’s dream of making India clean. The Prime Minister’s *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* is a national mission to make India’s streets, roads, and infrastructure clean by 2019. Apart from the ensuring general cleanliness and safe disposal or recycling of solid waste alongside bringing a behavioural change in people regarding healthy sanitary practices and public consciousness about the linkages of health and hygiene, the crucial—almost central—component of the mission is construction of toilets. Besides constructing toilets in every school immediately, it plans to construct 12 crore toilets in rural India by October 2019. The aim is to provide every household a toilet and thus eliminate open defecation. Conversion of insanitary toilets to pour-flush toilets and eradication of manual scavenging are an integral part of the mission’s objective. No doubt it is a national and noble mission, and if India succeeds in eliminating open defecation by 2019, which is the promise of the Prime Minister, it will indeed be a great achievement.

Our Sulabh movement is making an all-out effort to realize the dreams of Mahatma Gandhi and Prime Minister Modi. We are making efforts to build a broad alliance of politicians, corporations, NGOs and civil society to spread awareness of the Swachh Bharat to evolve it into a people’s movement and turn the vision of open-defecation-free India into a reality. All stake-holders are aware that besides the need of inculcation of behavioural change alongside the cultural and social issues that will have to be carefully dealt on the ground, the real challenge is to construct millions of toilets. Suffice here to say that as the premium centre of sanitation in the country, Sulabh has a pragmatic vision of how the goal of open-defecation-free India can be achieved within the stipulated time, and we are also eager to collaborate with the Government, Corporations and all other interested social and business agencies for making this goal possible.

Besides our engagement with environmental sanitation in the form of hundreds of public toilets in urban areas, Sulabh has been intensely engaged in the area of rural sanitation. Sulabh has designed several models of rural toilets suited to different socio-cultural, physical, geological and hydro-geological conditions of villages in different parts of the country. Sulabh has been advocating the promotion of two-pit pour-flush Sulabh toilets designed
for rural areas, the cost of which ranges from Rs. 15,000 to Rs. 50,000. The beneficiaries thus have the option to choose a particular design according to their economic condition.

Sulabh household toilets are an ideal solution to open-air defecation in rural areas, where there is no sewerage system, where problems of insanitation abound, and where excreta disposal is a matter of letting nature take its own course. Although our basic toilet technology needs no change, yet the sanitation specifics have to be tailored to suit the rural requirements. Alteration in the design and use of local materials is required for reducing the cost. Sulabh has prepared several alternative designs both for superstructure as well for the leach pits for disposal of the waste with a view to satisfying people of different economic strata as well as catering to their socio-cultural habits. These have been designed and constructed in order to give the people a wide range of choice. Sulabh has initiated a well-planned programme for popularization of Sulabh-type individual toilets in rural areas. The important components of this programme are motivation, communication support, community involvement, health education and publicity through audio-visual aids.

Sulabh has taken up programme of rural sanitation in 436 districts of the country, where our volunteers have been trained in the technology, methodology, implementation and follow up work. Sulabh is engaged in implementation of rural sanitation programme in several states, besides being involved in a countrywide promotional campaign involving dissemination of information, motivation of potential users/adopters and extension education and follow up. A campaign has been launched to make the people in rural areas aware about the need of personal, household and community sanitation. We have published sanitation-related leaflets and books in 24 languages, which are being distributed by Sulabh volunteers in villages all over the country. And the Sulabh volunteers help the beneficiaries of the low-cost rural sanitation programme under the Centrally Sponsored Rural Sanitation Programme (CRSP) in obtaining subsidy for the construction of household latrines.

In the states where rural sanitation programme is in operation, Sulabh takes the responsibility for collecting the application, getting it processed and
undertaking the construction of toilets. At the time of construction, the house-owner is requested to keep a watch on the quality of construction and material used by Sulabh, and after the work is finished, the house-owner is required to fill a form confirming the date of completion of the work and stating whether he or she is satisfied with the work or not. After completion of the work, Sulabh issues a guarantee card to every householder. This ensures free rectification of construction defects or deficiencies, if any, noticed during the first five years. Sulabh thus ensures trouble-free functioning of the Sulabh toilets. The house-owner is also educated about the maintenance of the toilet. A sample checking of completed toilets is undertaken periodically by Sulabh volunteers as a follow up. Sulabh has built a special infrastructure to ensure quality construction and render satisfactory follow-up services.

As far as public toilets in rural areas are concerned, Sulabh has its reservations. Because of high-costs involved in construction and maintenance, it finds them economically unviable and unsuitable to the socio-cultural ethos in the countryside. Sulabh’s reservations are based on its wide experience of constructing and maintaining thousands of public toilets in cities throughout the country. Sulabh has found that community toilets constructed by municipal authorities are not properly maintained, and hence not generally used, even though the local authorities possess organized infrastructure. In rural areas, panchayats do not have this infrastructure and the water needed for the use and upkeep of public toilets may also not be easily available. In our considered view, unless proper operation and maintenance is ensured, community toilets should not be provided in rural areas.

However, Sulabh is of the view that for demonstration purposes two to four seated community toilets may be constructed in schools, anganwadis, health sub-centres, panchayat bhawans and community development centres, etc., in order to let people know about the importance of sanitary toilet and its benefits, eventually leading the people to get motivated to adopt the system in their houses. Sulabh favours the construction of community toilets at Block Development Office, market yards and bus depots in rural areas, as there is likelihood of collection of adequate amount for proper maintenance. Sulabh is also advocating for the provision of flush composting toilets along with Indira Awas Yojana or other housing schemes in the rural areas.

In recent years, Sulabh has taken up various programmes such as health
check-up camps, health and hygiene education campaigns in several villages of Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Haryana. Sulabh has implemented a project on Sustainable Development and Health Environment in villages of Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab and Rajasthan. This has been sponsored by WHO and its implementation facilitated by the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, with the objective of promoting safe drinking water, sanitation and rural water supply.

Under the initiative of Sulabh Purified Drinking Water that we have launched recently, impure water from the rivers, ponds, water bodies and taps is purified by the Sulabh technologies, which becomes safe for human consumption. Sulabh has installed water treatment plants to make the Sulabh Purified Drinking Water at three sites in West Bengal, namely Madhusudankati (24 Parganas, near Bangladesh border), Mayapur and Murshidabad. Water is drawn from the river Ganga in Mayapur and Murshidabad, while in Madhusudankati it is taken from a local pond. After its treatment at the Sulabh Water Treatment Plant, the water from the river/pond becomes purified and absolutely safe for drinking. Sulabh is bottling this water as Sulabh Safe Drinking Water which is available for 50 paise per litre. At the entrance of Sulabh Campus in Delhi, it is also available in the Sulabh Water ATM at rate of one rupee per litre.

For the effective implementation of sanitation programme in rural areas Sulabh has made over the years following proposals in various ways to the Central and State Governments.

An intense campaign at national and local level is necessary to make people aware of the adverse effects of open defecation which is responsible for infections and a number of diseases. But unless the people get the proper toilet, they should be motivated to put on shoes or chappals while going for open defecation as this will save them from parasitic diseases. They should be educated to put soil on human excreta after defecation so that flies may not sit on night-soil and become carrier of diseases like diarrhoea, dysentery, dehydration, cholera, etc., which is responsible for death of about half a million children every year in the country. This type of education will be necessary until toilet facilities are available in the villages.

Experience shows that it is not practicable to impose uniform design on users. There should be several designs of flush toilets meant for families below
poverty line or those belonging to middle income or higher income groups. Sulabh has prepared several designs. Choice of designs should be left to beneficiaries who will take a decision, keeping in view their resources. The possible help either in the form of subsidy or loan or both should be extended to all beneficiaries who want to have toilets in their homes irrespective of income groups. The first-come-and-served should be the criterion for the selection. Interest-free bank loans should be provided to all beneficiaries who want to have toilets in their houses.

Programme of construction of toilets in rural areas is linked to making people aware of sanitation standards and health impact of insanitary conditions which require house-to-house contacts and follow-up. This can be effectively done by the NGOs. The role of NGOs is crucial in the implementation of sanitation programme throughout the country. The NGOs should be identified either by the State Governments or the District Administration. The selection of the NGOs should be based on their experience, expertise and infrastructure.

The NGOs identified for implementation of the programme should be given proper training in various aspects of the programme. The entire range of training starting with information, education, communication, implementation and follow-up should be given to the same NGO. It has been experienced that if the work is divided among various organisations, it becomes a case of divided responsibilities that hamper progress of the work. The NGOs selected for sanitation work should be allowed 15 per cent of the estimated cost of promotional and implementation activities, including follow up services. In addition, 10 per cent of the project cost should be allowed for training and support services, and publicity which would include printing of booklets, posters, organizing street shows, etc., to promote the cause of sanitation, hygiene and health.

Summing up, nothing less than a nationwide movement will be able to solve the country’s huge sanitation deficit and resultant health problems. But if we rise to this challenge and generate the necessary synergy for the environmental sanitation, which is absolutely critical to achieve the objectives of the ongoing Clean India Mission, India will not only ensure health and happiness to its millions of suffering citizens, but also move in the orbit of the world’s most developed and prosperous countries.