



What Swachh Bharat Abhiyan ignores

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Highlights

Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA) was an unprecedented nationwide initiative aimed to inspire the public to voluntarily clean public spaces as a service to the nation. Concurrently, municipalities began to employ more contractual labourers — mostly scavengers forced into the profession by their caste — to remove waste.

Adopting the Western approach

- The West introduced technologies to systematically remove waste.

For example, when Londoners experienced the 'Great Stink' in 1858, the government realised that it would need a holistic sewerage plan, which would become part of the London water infrastructure, to remove filth and treat waste from the river Thames in a sustainable way. Soon, the construction of toilets in households and shops became mandatory.

Issues

- The Swachh Bharat campaign hardly addresses a reworking of the underground sewerage system.
- According to a reply by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment to the Lok Sabha in December 2017, over 300 cases of deaths due to manual scavenging, mostly from particular caste groups, were reported that year.
- Punitive measures should exhort the public to learn where and how one should urinate, defecate and dispose of garbage.
- The campaign, however, burdens the contractual labourer with an 'exclusive' right to cleaning public spaces, while making it a voluntary act for the 'public' to not defecate, urinate or litter in random spaces.
- In India, waste carries the stigma that is attached to pollution and caste, as does the process of removal ('scavenging'), and the occupation ('scavenger').
- The waste remover in India is not a professional, like in the West. All of these are considered to be contaminated by caste pollution.
- In short, stigma resides in the profession, the labour, the body, and in the space.
- The workers, as per the campaign, have to go to the yard to segregate the waste. Manually segregating the waste at the landfill compromises their hygiene and health.

Addressing the stigma

- Similarities between the secular SBA and the casteist form of manual scavenging are evident, but they have gone unnoticed.

- The SBA enables a disjunction between the cleaning and disposing of waste, where the cleaning is a voluntary 'service' which caste Hindus are called upon to undertake, while collecting and disposing waste is a 'duty' relegated to municipal workers from particular castes.

Any tangible achievement of a clean India is possible only if the stigma attached to sanitary labour, place and waste are critically addressed by caste-neutralising these professions and through adoption of technologies.

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