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Editorial

Swachh Bharat Abhiyan and the Politics of Sanitation

On 15 August, 2014, the Prime Minister of India, Mr. Narendra Modi, gave a clarion call for a 'Swachh Bharat Abhiyan' (Clean India Mission) from the ramparts of the Red Fort to all citizens of the country to work towards improving cleanliness and building 120 million toilets to eradicate open defecation by 2019, on the occasion of the 150th Birth Anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi. This 'Swachh Bharat' Mission was officially launched on Gandhi Jayanti day on 2nd October, 2014, at Rajghat in New Delhi with a lot of media coverage given to the Prime Minister and other Ministers picking up brooms for the occasion.

It is important to know the fact that the 'Swachh Bharat Abhiyan' is not a new programme, but the latest version of sanitation programmes re-introduced, revised and renamed by successive governments for the last three decades. The politics of sanitation began with the introduction of Central Rural Sanitation Programme (CRSP) by the Rajiv Gandhi-led Congress Government in 1986. This same programme was renamed Total Sanitation Programme (TSP) by the Atal Bihari Vajpayee-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) Government in 1999. The very same sanitation programme was revised and renamed 'Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan' by the Manmohan Singh-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Government in 2012. The Narendra Modi-led NDA government thought it politically expedient to again revise, rename and re-introduce the same sanitation programme with a much hyped-up version 'Swachh Bharat Abhiyan'.

On the one hand, successive governments have played the politics of re-introducing, revising and renaming sanitation programmes for the last three decades, while on the other hand, during the same period the issues of sanitation workers have not been addressed and they have been engaged in a struggle for their dignity and rights. Almost all sanitation workers belong to the lowest rung of society, the scheduled castes. In addition, the most dehumanising form of labour, manual scavenging, continues to be practised to this day. The employment of manual scavengers was prohibited by a legislation made by Parliament in 1993, yet the practice continued. This necessitated another legislation

by Parliament in 2013 which focussed not only on the prohibition of the employment of manual scavengers, but also their rehabilitation. However, the indecent practice of manual scavenging continues to be practiced in many parts of the country even today. Ironically, on the occasion of the 125th birth anniversary of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, sanitation workers also known as Safai Karmacharis went on a nation-wide yatra in the first few months of 2016 to highlight their plight and bring to the attention of the citizens of the country that hundreds of manual scavengers lose their lives every year while cleaning septic tanks and sewers. Therefore, in India today, we experience a paradoxical situation whereby on the one hand we have a very high profile 'Swachh Bharat Abhiyan' and on the other hand we have Safai Karmacharis highlighting the hundreds of deaths of manual scavengers with the simple message "Stop Killing Us".

This issue of Social Action is dedicated to all the unsung heroes, who have sacrificed their lives cleaning sewers and septic tanks throughout the country. The articles from authors hailing from all over the country speak of the struggle and pain of communities associated with 'unclean' occupations hidden behind the glamour of high-profile sanitation programmes such as 'Swachh Bharat Abhiyan'. This issue begins with the article "Clean India Campaign and Prevailing Realities of Manual Scavengers", where Virendra Shahare presents a grim picture of the status of manual scavengers in society and illustrates with personal testimonies the daily struggles of persons belonging to these communities. He argues that the legislations and schemes of the Government have had little impact and more needs to be done to improve the socio-economic status of these communities. The next article by Sahaya Philomin Raj highlights the aspect of caste-based exclusion of manual scavengers. He argues that that on account of the type of occupation they are engaged in, they have to endure discrimination in their social milieu. Due to social exclusion they are unable to enjoy decent living conditions, including access to healthcare and education. They are politically powerless and the mainstream media ignore them as well. Even the judiciary has failed to ensure the enforcement of laws prohibiting manual scavenging. The author concludes with several suggestions for the eradication of manual scavenging and welfare of manual scavenger communities.

Meera's article "Swachh Bharat and Don't Touch: Struggles of Balmikis

in Uttar Pradesh” examines the struggles of Balmikis for dignity in Uttar Pradesh. In particular, she traces the struggles of organisations such as Balmiki Achhut Association in their efforts to eradicate the stigma of untouchability in society. Renuka Ramanujam’s article on “Educational Disadvantages of Children from Households Engaged in Historically ‘Unclean’ Occupation” is based on a research study conducted in Haryana. Her study reveals that the education system continues to perpetuate a culture of discrimination and exclusion based on caste and occupation in a way that adversely affects access to schools, enrolment rates, persistence rates and learning outcomes of children associated with households engaged in ‘unclean’ occupations. She argues that the State must not abdicate its responsibility of providing quality education to children of communities engaged in ‘unclean’ occupations.

“Interrogating the Role of the State and Understanding Social Mobility among Manual Scavengers in India” is critical of the State for its failure to address the issues of social justice and promotion of social mobility in communities engaged in occupations related to sanitation and waste management. After analysing the legal provisions and welfare schemes for manual scavenger communities, the author, Tina Anil, argues that programmes such as ‘Swachh Bharat Abhiyan’ may not produce desired results unless it is customised to accommodate the specific needs of the invisible, marginalised and excluded communities engaged in sanitation related works.

After the Parliament passed laws on the prohibition of manual scavenging in India, the main concern has shifted to the rehabilitation of communities engaged in manual scavenging. Kamlesh Kumar and Chandrakant Sasane advocate a holistic approach to rehabilitation of persons engaged in manual scavenging in their article “Right based Approach of Rehabilitation for Manual Scavenger Community: Towards a Holistic Model”. After analysing various models of rehabilitation such as Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) Model, the Badaun Model and the Rights-based Model prescribed in new legislation of 2013, the authors advocate a holistic approach to rehabilitation of persons who were previously engaged in manual scavenging.

Pradyumna Bag’s article “Bartan System: Socio-legal Dimensions of Unclean Occupation in Odisha” is a critique of the Bartan System practised in the rural areas of Odisha. Such systems allow upper castes

to appropriate labour and resources of Dalit communities in the name of religion and tradition. Dalit communities are compelled to render traditional service to upper castes and face debilitating humiliation and social boycott if they refuse to do so. In spite of legal sanction against the practice of this oppressive system, it continues to be practiced in many parts of Odisha. The author suggests that mere legislation does not suffice, but there is a need for eradication of this system through awareness, education and moral regeneration.

In the wake of the 'Swachh Bharat Abhiyan', the articles reveal that the social reality of caste is so deeply rooted in the psyche of the dominant communities in the country that mere legislations and schemes are not enough to bring about a change in the quality of life of communities engaged in sanitation and waste management. There is a need for citizens of the country to be aware of the nuances of the politics of sanitation and clean up minds and hearts to respect the dignity of all citizens of India, especially those engaged in 'unclean' occupations.

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