

Is the Swachh Bharat Mission the Way to a Cleaner India?*

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On the face of it, the campaign to clean India is something that obviously must be welcomed and accepted by every right-thinking citizen: something unexceptionable in intent and clearly desirable in stated outcomes. But it suffers from the same deficiencies that now appear to mark several initiatives of this government, making it more bluster than actual delivery. It was announced as a public declaration in a blaze of media hype by the Prime Minister. But the manner in which it has been propagated suggests little recognition of the various causes of the lack of cleanliness. The campaign does not seem to have been thought through in a way that would make it even partially successful; and has not been provided minimally required public funds in a systematic way that would make a difference.

So what exactly is the “[Swachh Bharat Mission](#)”? At one level it is an awareness and mobilisation campaign, requiring pledges by citizens to undertake to spend 100 hours a year devoted to “cleaning up” and also to involve at least ten others in the campaign, thereby creating effectively a mass movement directed towards cleanliness. The top-down nature of the directive, nudging all public employees and educational institutions (for example) to take such a pledge, is presumably designed to ensure even greater participation, while the high-profile involvement of some film stars and other celebrities should provide greater public attention. But in addition to awareness, it attempts to mobilise the voluntary unpaid labour of millions of Indians to augment the dwindling number of public workers, aiming to achieve the objective without too much additional public spending or paid employment.

At yet another level, it is a kind of Public-Private Partnership, seeking to involve the corporate sector in building toilets (presumably using their “Corporate Social Responsibility” funds) thereby also reducing the public burden of such spending. As it happens, thus far the response from the private sector has been relatively tight-fisted and quite unimaginative. It has focussed on much-publicised building of toilets in various “unserved” locations, without even the basic checks on availability of water supply or suitability of particular types of toilets to particular areas and social contexts. It is not an accident that previous such drives by different governments have tended to dissipate largely because the toilets themselves were constructed in an insensitive and inappropriate manner, so that across the country one can find unused toilets being used as storage sheds.

So this issue of sanitation – and particularly the issue of reducing open defaecation – should not only be about “raising the awareness” of people (most of whom would be only too happy to use modern toilets if they were indeed usable in the first place). It is also and most of all about reducing the stupidity of policy makers and implementers, who persist in top-down sanitation solutions that take no account of the real needs and situation of the users themselves and allow them absolutely no say about the manner of provisioning of toilets and other sanitation facilities.

But even the issue of awareness is being mishandled by the current campaign, in two important ways. It puts the onus (and the blame) on individual behaviour, regardless of material constraints and social conditions, and does not recognise the huge role of public policy and particularly of public spending and management of the complex

tasks associated with overall cleanliness, sanitation and waste disposal. And it does not even take up the important issue of managing waste, which cannot be done in a random and unscientific way by individuals if it is to be at all socially effective.

It is certainly true that many Indians tend to be much less mindful of the requirements of public cleanliness than those of private ones, and the need to generate greater social perceptions of this is clearly an imperative. But just exhorting a push for greater cleanliness in public spaces is unlikely to have the desired effect (and may even be counter-productive, as I will indicate below) if it is not accompanied by clear directives about how this is to be achieved in sustainable ways. Unfortunately, this has been sadly lacking in the campaign thus far, thereby generating what can only be misplaced enthusiasm for very public displays of sweeping and collecting rubbish, with very little understanding of what must eventually be done with the garbage thus collected.

So, one of the remarkable features of this campaign has been its apparent ignorance about crucial issues with respect to waste management. Yet inadequate and shoddy waste management is not only one of the more significant features of “dirty” India, it is also a major and emerging material and health concern with potentially disastrous impacts. The Swachh Bharat Mission appears to be oblivious to this – so we have the ludicrous spectacle of not just the Prime Minister himself but also assorted celebrities who have been roped in for the show, sweeping up all kinds of garbage that ought to be sorted out (according to recyclability, biodegradability, etc.) and shoving it all together into plastic bags! A more environmentally unfriendly way of ensuring cleanliness can hardly be imagined.

This betrays complete ignorance of what are now globally accepted norms on how to deal with rubbish (“so last century”, as a young person I know commented). And by creating this wrong example as the supposed ideal, the campaign is encouraging an inefficient and environmentally damaging pattern of so-called “cleanliness” that will have the opposite effect of creating more ecological problems in future.

By contrast, those genuinely concerned with sanitation and waste management elsewhere in India have already shown the importance of sorting waste and dealing with it differently. In Bangalore a movement organised by a few residents to encourage composting from household garbage and creative ways of recycling is capturing attention. In Kerala, recent initiatives in the town of Alapuzha, ([Thomas Isaac, “Swachh Bharat Abhiyan can take a lesson from Alapuzha”](#) Indian Express, 17 October 2014) indicate the many possibilities of dealing with municipal garbage in an eco-friendly and cost-efficient way, with the participation of householders and the organisation delivered by public locally elected bodies.

Obviously this requires more than enthusiastic participation by the general public: it requires public systems of sanitation and waste management that allow the different types of garbage to be sorted and dealt with in socially useful ways. But so far, this is exactly what is missing in both the discourse and the implementation of this mission. And this lack of either understanding or foresight is likely to make the real cleaning of India even more difficult in the future than it is at present.

One crucial area is e-waste, the problem of disposal of electronic equipment that typically contains many poisonous chemicals. As rates of obsolescence become ever more rapid for electronic goods like computers, mobile phones, and other electronic

gadgets, more such products are casually dumped. Typically there is a casual attitude to such e-waste in both public and private contexts, and piles of such abandoned equipment in different states of decay can be found all over the country – not just in towns and cities but even in our villages. This has massive environmental implications, affecting the quality of soil and water, giving rise to many hazards.

Another major limitation of this official cleanliness drive is the lack of understanding of – or even concern with – the complex relation between dirt and poverty. Cleanliness is mostly a luxury for the poor, especially when it requires access to clean water, sanitary spaces in which to perform basic ablutions, containers in which to store and dispose of waste, and of course the time in which to do all these things apart from the labour required to earn a livelihood and enable household reproduction. Treating lack of cleanliness as an anti-social aberration (such as expressed in the proposal that vigilante groups of children and young people can publicly expose “wrongdoers” who are not clean) completely misses this basic point: that those who are forced to live in poverty are usually not dirty out of choice, but because their material conditions do not allow them the luxury of cleaner options.

There is the other – supply side- aspect of ensuring cleanliness in a society, which also directly concerns the poor, since they dominate in the army of sanitation workers, refuse collectors, scavengers and others who are absolutely essential to maintaining even the most minimal levels of cleanliness. If Bharat is indeed to become Swachh, and that too by a defined year not too far in the future, it cannot achieve this without proactive concern for the lives and working conditions of those workers who must ultimately take on the real work of cleaning.

But Indian society in general has yet to accord such workers dignity and respect, much yet to provide them with adequate basic incomes through proper living wages. The conditions under which such workers operate is generally abysmal. The idea of protective uniforms and equipment for those who engage in the hazardous jobs of collecting and sorting out waste almost seems to be farfetched, as most such work is relegated to informal self-employment that leaves the workers at the mercy of private contractors and forces them to accept often below-subsistence wages or payments. Women and children who are still substantially engaged in such activities find themselves exposed to a variety of risks, ranging from severe exploitation as workers to personal physical abuse to health hazards of dealing with unsafe and contaminating materials. Until we improve the conditions of those who are responsible for keeping our spaces clean, and give them also clean and healthy conditions, how can we possibly hope to achieve any degree of “swachhata”?

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