IS SWACHH BHARAT ABHIYAN WORKING WITH PROPER MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Mission) has achieved massive scale and notable infrastructure gains, but its management shows a mixed record of high-performing urban centers alongside persistent systemic and operational challenges.

Keywords- Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, management, scale, gain, record, challenges

Introduction

• Massive Infrastructure Growth: Under Phase 1 (2014–2019) and Phase 2 (2020–2025), over 100 million household and community toilets were built across rural and urban areas, largely eradicating visible open defecation in many regions.
• Urban Models of Excellence: Cities like Indore and Surat demonstrate effective management through 100% door-to-door garbage collection, strict source segregation, technology-driven GPS waste tracking, and regular civic audits.
• Competitive Governance: Annual exercises like Swachh Survekshan foster healthy competition among municipalities to upgrade sanitation services and waste processing plants.
• Institutional Drives: Regular nationwide initiatives—such as special administrative cleanliness campaigns and e-waste management rules—keep sanitation prioritized within government bodies.[1,2,3]

Management Shortcomings & Criticisms

• Poor Construction & Maintenance: Reports from the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) and independent reviews have highlighted substandard toilet construction, non-functional or locked public toilets, and a lack of running water supply in remote areas.
• Inadequate Waste Processing: While collection has improved, a significant portion of solid waste and fecal sludge still lacks proper treatment, leading to localized dumping and contamination of water bodies.
• Caste & Labor Concerns: The reliance on outsourced private contractors has occasionally perpetuated hazardous manual labor and caste-linked sanitation risks while reducing formal public sanitation oversight.
• Behavioral & Cultural Gaps: Building physical infrastructure did not automatically change deep-rooted habits in all communities, requiring continuous rather than one-time behavioral campaigns

Success stories in urban areas

SBM-U has brought impressive changes in many cities in India, wherein Indore and Surat have emerged as role models for maintaining cleanliness and efficiently managing the municipalities' scientific waste. The city of Indore has topped the ranking in Swachh

Surekshan and has been accorded the status of India's cleanest city for many consecutive years. This is attributed to the entire system of waste management, including waste collection from door to door, segregation at source and proper composting. Hence, Indore is one among the 3,547 Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) that have been declared as Open Defecation Free Plus (ODF+), with functional and hygienic community and public toilets. The local authorities have imposed a strict fine for littering, in addition to raising public awareness about adopting sustainable practices.

Similarly, Surat has gone a long way in managing its waste and sanitation. Innovative strategies of waste management have transformed it from one of the dirtiest cities into one of the cleanest cities. Surat deploys technology for tracking waste collection and disposal, as for that matter, its processing at different waste processing plants. The city is one among the 1,191 ULBs that have achieved ODF++ status, meaning complete faecal sludge management. According to local authorities, public awareness related to sanitation has increased manifold, with people showing up as volunteers in cleanliness drives and community activities. Testimonials from residents point to a new civic pride in cleanliness; many residents speak of an improved quality of life. These victories in Indore and Surat document the potential of the Swachh Bharat Mission to bring in a cleaner and healthier atmosphere in cities by efficiently managing their waste and enlisting the community.[4,5,6]
Success stories in rural areas

Success stories of SBM have emerged in a host of villages across India. For instance, Koraput village in Odisha, despite all the challenges, has been able to declare itself Open Defecation Free (ODF). It was local governance and active participation from citizens that led to the community's commitment to eliminating open defecation. In Gujarat, seven villages constructed household toilets and thus reached their ODF status. These success stories are the result of community involvement and the prioritisation of sanitation by local leaders.

Similarly in Navlewadi, Maharashtra, the government assisted the village in laying pipelines for fresh water and water tanks to ease the continuous problem of water scarcity. The government not only helped in the construction of toilets but also ensured that the families had a good quantity of provision of clean water to maintain proper hygiene. Success has been achieved by SBM mainly through community participation in rural areas.

In Darora village in Uttar Pradesh, children below the age of ten years took brooms to clean their village, encouraging people to join the efforts and connect with them. Local community involvement highlights the key actions needed at different levels to create real improvements in sanitation practices.

At the local level, governance structures, including Gram Panchayats, mobilise and create mechanisms for accountability in the implementation of sanitation projects. An innovative cluster-level plastic waste management system was a novelty under SBM Phase II in Sasewadi Gram Panchayat, Pune district, Maharashtra. It will not only help in managing plastic waste but also contribute to achieving ODF+ status. Community meetings were arranged to sensitise the residents about waste segregation and its management. Shortly, it

became a resident movement where every person claimed ownership of the sanitation initiatives.

The impact of achieving ODF status is significant for health and quality of life in rural areas. With improved sanitation facilities, cases of waterborne diseases were reduced; therefore, families started to enjoy better health status. Besides, dignified toilets with decent waste disposal systems have increased dignity and safety for the worst-hit women and children due to poor sanitation. So far, over five lakh villages have declared themselves ODF+, which further gives credence to the community-led interventions and the commitment of the Indian government towards a neat and healthy rural environment. Sixteen states and Union Territories have so far achieved 100% ODF+ status, which goes on to show that sustainable sanitation is achievable when communities come together.[7,8,9]

Discussion

Driving factors behind the progress of Swachh Bharat Mission

The Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) has made remarkable strides in improving sanitation across India, driven by several key factors:

Government policies and funding

The SBM was officially launched on October 2, 2014, with a bold goal of transforming the sanitation behaviour of 550 million people and constructing 100 million toilets within five years. For the 2024-25 fiscal year, the Swachh Bharat Mission-Gramin (SBM-G) has received an allocation of US$ 3.72 billion (Rs. 7,192 crore), reflecting a 3% rise from last year's revised budget. This funding is directed towards maintaining Open Defecation Free (ODF) status in rural areas and advancing solid and liquid waste management initiatives. The overall budget demonstrates the government's persistent commitment to improving sanitation and hygiene across the country, continuing the momentum established by the SBM since its launch in 2014.[10,11,12]

Community engagement and awareness programs

Community involvement has been a cornerstone of the SBM's success. The initiative encouraged village-led initiatives, fostering a sense of pride and friendly competition among communities striving for ODF status. Events such as the “Gaurav Yatra” (pride tour) celebrated these achievements, while awareness programmes highlighted the importance of sanitation for health and dignity. This grassroots involvement transformed sanitation from a taboo topic into a community priority.

Role of technology and innovation in sanitation solutions

Technology has played a significant role in advancing sanitation solutions under the SBM. Innovative approaches, such as the use of mobile apps for monitoring toilet

construction and maintenance, have streamlined processes and improved accountability. Additionally, the introduction of eco-friendly toilets and waste management systems has enhanced sustainability, ensuring that the benefits of the mission are long-lasting.

Partnerships with NGOs and the private sector

The success of the SBM can also be attributed to effective partnerships with Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and the private sector. Collaborations with these entities have facilitated community outreach, education and resource mobilisation, amplifying the mission's impact. These partnerships have brought expertise and additional funding, further strengthening the initiative.

Innovative marketing campaigns

Innovative marketing campaigns have been crucial in promoting the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) and raising awareness about sanitation. A notable example is the "Swachh Bharat" anthem, launched in 2019, featuring prominent Bollywood celebrities to inspire a nationwide movement for cleanliness. This anthem was widely shared on social media and television, effectively engaging the youth. Additionally, campaigns such as “#MyCleanIndia” encouraged citizens to showcase their cleanliness efforts online, fostering community involvement and pride. These creative strategies not only increased the mission's visibility but also shifted public perception, making sanitation a priority across the country.[13,14,15]

Innovative solutions for the Swachh Bharat Mission

Leveraging technology and AI

Artificial intelligence and robotics are steadily being integrated to change the face of sanitation practices. For example, the recent introduction of India's first septic tank cleaning robot, the Homosep Atom, is nothing short of a revolution in manual cleaning methods. With this robot, confined spaces can be inspected, cleaned and managed with much reduced risks associated with manual scavenging and increased efficiency at work. Currently, this technology functions in 16 cities, effectively clearing blockages in manholes and helping reduce sewage overflows.

Innovative waste management solutions

Startups such as Solinas are making miniature robots that enter pipelines to clean up any type of contamination. Solinas’ technologies, including Endobot and Swasth AI, have been crucial in the detection and mitigation of water contamination and wastage; thus offering sustainable solutions against urban sanitation problems.

Results

The Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) has achieved significant milestones in improving sanitation across India, enhancing public health, promoting dignity and fostering community engagement. In the future, sustaining government support will be very

cardinal to sustaining momentum and ensuring that the progress achieved so far can be expanded. This will involve sustained funding, policy support and encouragement of innovative solutions to meet emerging challenges in sanitation. While community engagement is equally important, a sense of ownership and pride in cleanliness helps citizens take on greater responsibility for contributing towards the cleanliness of their surroundings.

Looking ahead, the use of advanced technologies, including AI and robotics, will be very crucial in bringing changes in sanitation practices and helping deal with problems concerning manual scavenging and waste management. Collaboration with NGOs and the private sector will strengthen the scope and impact of the sanitation programmes, especially in areas that are deprived. Though the SBM has achieved enormous success, it needs to be a continuous process if a clean and healthy environment for all citizens is the goal. [16,17,18]

Persistent Traditional Beliefs Regarding Sanitation Work:

Sanitation and waste management in India are associated with the wide prevalence of caste. Historically, the subjugated castes have been forced to carry out sanitation work. The SBM tried to create a narrative that sanitation is everyone's job. Instead, it has ended up continuing the same old caste practices.

The SBM is allegedly successful project; as no Opposition party or community has raised objections to it. While the entire project is governed and monitored by state agencies, the design makes it clear that large capital-intensive technologies are promoted. However, still those practices continue to hog the limelight.

No Universal Access to Toilets:

The Union government claims that India is open defecation-free, but the reality is different. A Comptroller and Auditor General report in 2020 raised many questions about the government's claims over the success of the SBM on this front. It indicated the poor quality of construction of toilets under this scheme.

A few urbanisation studies pointed out that in some metros, communities in slums still do not have access to public toilets. Even in rural India, toilet construction has not been linked to waste treatment.

In peri-urban areas, the faecal sludge generated is tossed into the environment. Septic tanks are cleaned by manual scavengers and the sludge is thrown into various water systems.

Technology Not Acting as Alternative to Involvement of People:

One thing the government intended to do via SBM was to reduce the involvement of people in waste management by replacing them with large, capital-intensive technologies. However, these installations have refused to live up to their promoters' promises, leaving town after town screaming for resources to fix them and, importantly, respond to the health crises emerging from badly managed waste.

Take, for example, solid and liquid waste management in cities. In most towns, the Union government is employing technological solutions in handling solid waste. Some of these solutions are in the form of waste-to-energy plants and biological methanation. But there are barely any success stories in either case.

In this scenario, the governments outsourced most of the work to private players, who employed the same subjugated communities to handle waste.

Making Sanitation a Profit Entity:

City governments are being asked to buy more machines including road sweeping machines that cost no less than Rs. 1 crore, more vehicles to transport the waste from one corner to another with geo-tagging, and so on. Funds are made available to the city governments for such plans. However, all this work is being handed over to large contractors entering the city domains for making sanitation a profit entity.

Most of the workers employed by these contractors are Dalits. Hence, a scheme fully owned by the state has become a toolkit for the privatisation of public health services and continued caste discrimination.

Lack of Sanitation Inspectors:

In March, 2024, in the Himachal Pradesh High Court, the Urban Development Department said that there are just five sanitation inspectors in the Shimla Municipal Corporation, which comprises 34 wards. Instead of recruiting more such inspectors, this cadre is being declared dead after they retire.

In a State where there are more than 50 municipal bodies, there are only 20 sanitation inspectors, which means that there are some municipalities that have no sanitation inspectors.

Lack of Water Supply:

Infrastructures for toilet are important, but cannot alone stand as pre-requisite to interrupt fecal-oral transmission of pathogens. In rural areas, lack of water supply is a key issue, only 42.5% of households had access to water for use in toilets, which increase toilet nonusage rates.[18,19,20]

Other challenges such as improper fecal sludge management, inappropriate toilet technologies, and inadequate human resources persist that endanger in achieving sanitation coverage in rural areas.

Open Defecation as a Habit Among Children:

Data suggest that open defecation has decreased by 12% from 2015 to 2019, which means that nearly half of the rural population still defecates in the open. Open defection is traditional behavior in rural India and people perceive it to be healthier, cleaner, and sometimes “religiously acceptable.”

This issue of open defecation is of greater concern and worrisome because government studies indicate, the proportion of children below 15 years of old is practicing open defecation more frequently than other age groups.

Challenges in Richer States:

Despite progress, wealthier states showed mixed performance and smaller gains in toilet use compared to economically poorer states, highlighting the need for tailored strategies in different socio-economic contexts.

States like Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Gujarat showed smaller progress in regular toilet use compared to economically disadvantaged states, indicating that the program did not have the same impact across all states.

Conclusion

No doubt, India has made rapid progress to achieve the SDG 6 by increasing nationwide toilet access under SBM. At the same time, India must scrutinize its success within the framework of environment safety and fecal-oral transmission of disease that help, especially to children to spend their childhood free from malnourishment or premature death. By doing so, and by responding to the complexities of SBM identified, will show

India and other countries, the pathways of full-filling the sanitation agendas, by achieving universal sanitation for all and to meet the SDGs targets and objectives.[19]

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