

Swachh Bharat Is Not Mardi Gras

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In his speech from the rampart of the Red Fort on 15th August 2014 the Prime Minister made a fervent appeal to the nation to make a gift of a Swachh Bharat to Mahatma Gandhi on the occasion of his 150th birthday in 2019. This was followed up by a campaign launched on 2nd October, 2014 to start the process of cleaning India and as a symbolic gesture the Prime Minister and various dignitaries throughout the country themselves wielded a broom to clean the streets. Thereafter the Prime Minister invited nine distinguished persons from different fields, including the cinema, politics, sports, etc., to join the campaign so that their collective influence could bring millions of Indian into the cleanliness fold. All the nine persons have responded positively, with Sashi Tharoor of the Congress Party having to pay a political price in that he was immediately removed as spokesperson of the Congress Party because he had dared to support Narendra Modi. What would have happened if Narendra Modi had invited Rahul Gandhi to join the campaign? He would most probably have declined, which could be interpreted as a signal that the Congress Party does not believe in a clean India. The fact, however, is the Manmohan Singh government had itself started a campaign for what it described as Nirmal India, which obviously means that it has as great a stake in the country being clean, hygienic and sanitised as does BJP. The difference is one of approach, with Narendra Modi being more focused and energetic about achieving his goal.

Emulating the Prime Minister many people have joined the campaign in that they, too, have spared time to sweep a part of some street or the other. This is very welcome, but the spirit of these people is one of a carnival or Mardi Gras, almost a joyous occasion and a great opportunity for being photographed by the media, thus gaining a little welcome publicity. However, the seriousness of the call for Swachh Bharat and the sustained effort needed to achieve this does not seem to have sunk into most minds.

It is obvious that a country will be as clean as its citizens decide and their decision will be very largely determined by the physical environment and infrastructure created by the authorities. Switzerland, a mountainous country without a high density of population, is considered amongst the cleanest countries in the world and rightly so. Scenically Switzerland is like a picture postcard and climatically it is extremely temperate, which means that the relatively low temperatures assist in preservation of vegetation, etc. In terms of civic facilities and infrastructure, Switzerland has them of a very high order. In turn this encourages citizens to become partners in keeping the country clean and any lapse from the normal would be taken care of by the civic authorities and the law enforcement agencies. There is a general orderliness about the country and there is not only citizen awareness of the need to keep the country clean, but there is also strict law enforcement. There is also peer pressure against littering and this also helps.

At the other end of the spectrum is the small island city State of Singapore, where there is relatively high density of population. Of course a strong family planning policy has kept the population under check and to that extent Singapore has a stabilised population unlike the cities of India, where growth of population is almost uncontrolled. A city whose size is finite has time and space to improve the infrastructure, whereas a city whose growth is open ended has to run fast on the spot just to prevent the civic services from collapsing. This point is very important because unless we understand that our growth is open ended and must be checked, we cannot ever seriously tackle the problems of having an adequate civic infrastructure. Singapore is hot and humid, being located only just north of the equator. The problem with a hot and humid climate is that it

encourages fecundity of vegetation, animal life, insects and other pests, it accelerates degradation of rubbish and the subsequent putrefaction leads to environmental hazards and creates health problems. Singapore decided very early after independence that it would create an ideal nation State. Therefore, its civic services are of a very high order. Located at almost sea level it nevertheless has a drainage system which ensures that water and effluents are carried away, treated and then suitably disposed of. There are no stagnant pools of dirty water anywhere in Singapore and, as a consequence, there are no mosquitoes. The entire city is covered by an efficient sewerage system and sewage passes through primary, secondary and tertiary treatment so that the ultimate effluent is clean, almost potable. That takes care of water pollution. The government is ferocious about littering and dumping of garbage. Therefore, all solid waste is segregated into that which is biodegradable, non-degradable items which can be recycled and items which require disposal otherwise. Garbage has to be placed after separation only at designated points and the civic authorities regularly collect garbage and dispose of it in a manner which meets sanitary and hygienic norms. Because there is no putrefying garbage anywhere there are no flies and with pure drinking water and vector control water borne diseases and vector borne diseases are almost unknown in Singapore. There are heavy fines for any deviation from hygienic norms and law enforcement is very strict. That is why Singapore is almost one of the cleanest places earth.

Singapore is equally aware of the need to prevent air pollution. Because automobiles are amongst the biggest contributors of carbon monoxide to the atmosphere government decided to restrict the number of motor vehicles in the country. No factory manufacturing any automobile, even two-wheelers, may be located in Singapore. Cars and other motor vehicles are fully imported and there is very heavy import duty so that such vehicles are expensive. There is also a heavy annual vehicle tax to further discourage the private ownership of cars. There are many parking restrictions and a new motor vehicle may be purchased only after the number plate of an already owned vehicle is surrendered to the transport authorities. Cars older than a specified period have to be disposed of outside Singapore so that new vehicles with high emission standards replace those which are polluters. There is an extremely efficient public transport system and people are not only encouraged to use it but in fact prefer to do so because it is so much more convenient than driving one's own car

India is completely different. There is a paradox of people who are personally very clean and fastidious about body hygiene, clothes and the spotless cleanliness of the inside of the house, particularly the kitchen, combined with an appalling sense of civic indifference and social irresponsibility. The house must be clean but it is all right to throw garbage on the streets. The kitchen has to be clean but kitchen waste is allowed to putrefy. The bucket from which one bathes has to be shining, but water from the kitchen, bath room and toilet is allowed to spread into the street and collect in puddles of dirty water. Of this paradox, which is the reality of the clean India and the equal reality of the filthy India? Why do we have open defecation, heaps of garbage and pools of stagnant water? Is this because we do not care or is it because we have no option?

Rural India, fortunately, has land space and, therefore, the village as such is not densely populated. Of course we have the relatively larger villages packed together in the village *abadi*, leaving arable land available for cultivation. That makes good economic sense. However, even in a tightly configured village, generally speaking, garbage goes into heaps or trenches to be converted into manure. Fortunately even today, because village living is still fairly simple, non biodegradable material forms only a small part of the garbage. However, rural India and a great deal of urban India is still not equipped with a toilet in every house and, therefore, there is still substantial open defecation. Narendra Modi's call for the construction of toilets in every house and in every school is definitely a major departure from the policy of only scratching at the problem. Incidentally, extension of sanitation of this nature to every household is a possibility and, therefore, this is one target we can

achieve. If there are toilets with a proper treatment system, albeit of the Sulabh two pit model, we can crack down on open defecation and inculcate the habit of using a toilet in our people. Once a facility is available one sees no reason why all Indians cannot be made sanitation conscious.

A slum consists of self built housing, generally speaking of mud and junk material. The houses themselves are so nondescript as to almost not register visually. However, a slum is a foul habitation because it has no drainage, sewage, piped water supply, the conservancy teams of the municipality almost never go to a slum to collect the garbage, there are pools of stagnant water which give birth to clouds of mosquitoes and putrefying garbage on which both pigs and rag pickers root alike and which are the birth place of flies, pathogens and noxious insects. This is true of every slum in India, but a good example is that of the slum behind Panchsheel Nagar in Bhopal along Main Road Number 3, which is almost next door to the Maulana Azad National Institute of Technology. Panchsheel Nagar was a sites and services development for the poor in the early seventies of the last century and today it is a reasonably well serviced area with proper housing. It is pity that a slum has developed adjacent to a locality developed as a model for all slums in India. Here everything filthy about the slum is visible from the road. How can these slums dwellers become partners in the campaign for Swachh India when they are denied every civic facility to which our citizens are entitled? If we want the slum dwellers to contribute to a clean India then our civic authorities, our State and Central Governments have to ensure that with the help of the people there is some reordering of the slum so that there is reasonable access, there is clean piped water supply to every house so that water borne diseases are eradicated, there is an adequate sewerage system and a drainage system which contributes to sanitation and garbage is not allowed to accumulate but is regularly collected from designated sites and then suitably disposed of. Citizens who find that at least the minimum civic services are available to them would be amenable to responding to a call for civic hygiene at community level and at that stage those who do not conform can be subjected to heavy penalties.

One gave the example of Singapore, which is almost at sea level and the terrain is completely flat. Despite that Singapore has an efficient drainage system because it was properly designed and constructed. Contrast this with Bhopal which is a hilly city with fairly steep gradients, whose hills contain lakes into which all the water of the catchment drains. There can be no excuse for any water logging in Bhopal and despite this one finds that many areas of Bhopal do, in fact, become inundated. The reason for this is an inadequate drainage system, with many of the drains being built upon illegally. This has disturbed the normal drainage system dictated by topography. Arera Colony is one of the up market residential areas and in sector E-3 of Arera Colony with a fairly large drain which serves three major sectors of this area. The drain is not properly graded and it is partially choked by garbage thrown into it. It overflows in the rains and inundates the houses built along its brink and at all times it stinks. If our civic authorities cannot even maintain such a drain how can they expect our citizens to respond to a call for keeping the city clean?

One compliments the Bhopal Municipal Corporation for a major effort to ensure that water bodies in the city are kept relatively pollution free. For immersion of idols, *tazias*, etc., specially designated and designed water bodies are set aside in order to prevent the pollution of the lakes. Here the citizens, under the guise of religious fervour, become beasts, with no concern for the environmental havoc caused by their religious practices. In all religions the need to protect nature is an important precept. People who pollute through immersion are actually working against the interests of religion. This is one area where the State must intervene, even with harshness if necessary.

The campaign for cleanliness can work only if we begin by ensuring that every citizen has access to civic services designed to create a hygienic and sanitary environment. Why do our politicians not spend time in slums, impressing on the civic authorities the need to give the highest priority to providing minimum basic services? Why does the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh symbolically sweep one of the main roads of Bhopal instead of spending a few hours cleaning the garbage in one of the slums? If government is serious then let it realise that Swachh Bharat is a goal, to achieve which we need sustained hard work, in which the plans are carefully drawn up, priorities assigned, funds made available and the implementation of plans carefully supervised. It is certainly not Mardi Gras.
