



Sanitation

An Unfinished Indian Agenda

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Sanitation has long been a pressing issue in India, with millions of people lacking access to basic sanitation facilities and proper hygiene practices. The inadequate sanitation infrastructure not only poses health risks but also hampers economic development and perpetuates social inequalities. Despite significant progress in recent years, the nation still faces substantial challenges in achieving universal sanitation and addressing the associated socio-economic and health concerns. This article delves into the

unfinished agenda of sanitation in India, highlighting the underlying issues, progress made, and the way forward in ensuring a clean and hygienic environment for all its citizens. By examining the challenges that persist and exploring potential solutions, we can gain insight into the path towards a healthier and more sustainable future for India. Furthermore, the lack of proper sanitation facilities not only affects individual well-being but also hinders the overall development of communities and the nation as a whole. Inadequate sanitation

contributes to the spread of diseases, reduces productivity due to illness, and burdens healthcare systems. Moreover, it disproportionately affects vulnerable populations, including women, children, and marginalized communities, exacerbating existing social inequalities. As India strives to become a global leader and achieve its ambitious sustainable

development goals, addressing the unfinished agenda of sanitation stands as a critical priority. By recognizing the urgency of the situation and implementing effective strategies, India can pave the way towards a brighter and healthier future for its citizens, fostering inclusive growth and sustainable development.

The Challenges

1. Open Defecation: One of the primary challenges is the prevalence of open defecation, which remains a reality for a significant portion of the population. According to a UNICEF report, over 600 million people in India still defecate in the open, leading to the spread of diseases, environmental pollution, and personal safety concerns, especially for women and children.

2. Lack of Access to Sanitation Facilities: While access to toilets has improved, a substantial proportion of the population, particularly in rural areas and slums, still lacks access to basic sanitation facilities. Many households continue to use unimproved toilets or shared facilities, compromising privacy, dignity, and overall hygiene standards.

3. Behavioural Change and Awareness: Changing deep-rooted behaviours and cultural practices related to open defecation and hygiene is a complex process. Raising awareness and promoting behaviour change at the grassroots level remains a significant challenge, requiring sustained efforts and community engagement.

4. Waste Management: Proper waste management is crucial for maintaining cleanliness and preventing environmental pollution. Inadequate waste management

systems lead to the accumulation of solid waste and untreated wastewater, posing health hazards and degrading the environment.

5. Urban Sanitation: Rapid urbanization poses unique challenges in ensuring sanitation for urban dwellers. The growing population, inadequate infrastructure, and unplanned settlements contribute to inadequate sanitation facilities and poor waste management in cities, impacting the health and well-being of urban residents.

6. Financing and Implementation: Despite the government's efforts and various initiatives, the financing and effective implementation of sanitation programs remain a challenge. Limited funds, bureaucratic hurdles, and coordination issues hinder the progress of sanitation projects, particularly in remote and marginalized areas.

7. Maintenance and Sustainability: Building toilets alone is not sufficient; ensuring their functionality and maintenance are equally crucial. Sustaining behaviour change, proper usage of sanitation facilities, and regular maintenance require continued support, capacity building, and community involvement.

Progress Made

1. Swachh Bharat Mission: Launched in 2014, the Swachh Bharat Mission (Clean India Mission) aimed to make India open-defecation free and ensure universal access to sanitation facilities. The initiative led to the construction of millions of toilets, increased awareness about cleanliness, and notable progress in rural sanitation coverage. It also mobilized communities, local governments, and private sector participation.

2. Sanitation Coverage: India has made remarkable progress in improving sanitation coverage. According to government data, over 99% of rural households now have access to toilets, marking a significant increase from 38% in 2014. This achievement showcases the effectiveness of sustained efforts and the impact of focused campaigns.

3. Behaviour Change and Awareness: The Swachh Bharat Mission focused not only on infrastructure development but also on behaviour change and awareness campaigns. These initiatives aimed to educate communities about the importance of sanitation and promote hygienic practices, leading to improved behaviours related to open defecation and overall cleanliness.

4. Innovations and Technologies: The quest for better sanitation solutions has

prompted innovative approaches and technologies. Initiatives such as community-led total sanitation (CLTS), bio-toilets, and low-cost sanitation models have been successfully implemented in different regions, enhancing accessibility, sustainability, and affordability.

5. Public-Private Partnerships: The involvement of the private sector has played a crucial role in driving sanitation progress. Corporate entities, NGOs, and social enterprises have partnered with the government to support sanitation programs, contribute resources, and bring innovative solutions to the table.

6. Behavioural Impact Studies: Researchers and organizations have conducted studies to evaluate the impact of sanitation interventions and behaviour change campaigns. These studies provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of different approaches, helping to refine strategies and ensure greater impact.

7. International Collaborations: India has actively engaged in collaborations with international organizations, such as UNICEF and the World Bank, to leverage global expertise, share best practices, and access funding for sanitation projects. These collaborations have provided additional support and resources to accelerate progress.

The Unfinished Agenda

1. Sustainability: While increased access to toilets is an essential step, sustaining behavior change and ensuring the functionality and maintenance of sanitation facilities remain critical challenges. Ongoing support, community engagement, and effective monitoring are necessary to prevent the reversion to open defecation practices. This requires the establishment of

mechanisms for regular maintenance, repair, and hygiene education to ensure the long-term sustainability of sanitation infrastructure.

2. Waste Management: Proper waste management is integral to maintaining cleanliness and preventing environmental pollution. Comprehensive strategies should be implemented to address the disposal of

solid waste and wastewater, including promoting recycling, decentralized waste management systems, and creating awareness about the harmful effects of improper waste management. Efforts should also focus on improving the infrastructure and capacity for waste collection, segregation, and treatment.

3. Women's Safety and Dignity:

Sanitation facilities must be gender-sensitive and address the specific needs and safety concerns of women and girls. Access to clean and private toilets plays a crucial role in promoting their dignity, reducing the risk of harassment, and enabling their active participation in education and economic activities. Special attention should be given to ensuring safe and inclusive sanitation facilities, particularly in public spaces, schools, and workplaces.

4. Behavioural Change at Scale: While behaviour change campaigns have shown positive results, achieving behaviour change at scale remains a challenge. Deep-rooted cultural beliefs and practices related to sanitation and hygiene need to be addressed through sustained and tailored communication strategies. Engaging with communities, influencers, and local leaders can help in fostering a sense of ownership and sustained behaviour change.

The Way Forward

1. Continued Government Commitment:

The government should maintain its commitment to sanitation initiatives and allocate adequate resources to sustain progress. Policies should be implemented effectively at all levels, focusing on last-mile connectivity, monitoring, and addressing regional disparities. Regular monitoring and evaluation should be conducted to track progress and identify

5. Sanitation in Urban Areas: Urban areas face unique sanitation challenges due to rapid urbanization, population density, and inadequate infrastructure. Addressing the sanitation needs of urban areas requires integrated planning, efficient waste management systems, and ensuring access to sanitation facilities for marginalized communities residing in slums and informal settlements.

6. Quality and Access in Remote Areas:

Remote and marginalized areas, including tribal regions and hilly terrain, often face significant barriers in accessing sanitation facilities. Innovative and context-specific solutions, such as low-cost and eco-friendly toilets, need to be developed and implemented to ensure equitable access to sanitation services for all sections of society.

7. Financing and Partnerships:

Adequate financing remains crucial for the sustainability and expansion of sanitation initiatives. Governments, development agencies, and private sector entities should collaborate to mobilize resources and invest in sanitation infrastructure, behaviour change programs, and capacity building. Public-private partnerships can play a vital role in leveraging expertise, technology, and funding to accelerate progress.

areas that require further attention and intervention.

2. Behaviour Change Communication:

Comprehensive behaviour change campaigns should be continued, addressing deep-rooted cultural beliefs and practices related to sanitation and hygiene. Community engagement, local leadership, and the involvement of NGOs and social organizations are vital in driving long-lasting change. Behaviour change

communication strategies should be tailored to different regions and communities, taking into account their unique socio-cultural contexts.

3. Innovation and Technology:

Harnessing technological advancements can accelerate progress in sanitation. Innovative solutions such as bio-toilets, waterless toilets, and decentralized waste management systems can contribute to sustainable and cost-effective sanitation practices, particularly in remote and underserved areas. Research and development should be encouraged to identify and scale up appropriate technologies for sanitation infrastructure.

4. Strengthening Institutions and Capacity Building:

Strengthening institutions responsible for sanitation planning, implementation, and monitoring is essential. Capacity building initiatives should be undertaken to enhance the skills and knowledge of government officials, local authorities, and community members involved in sanitation programs. This will ensure effective management, maintenance, and sustainability of sanitation facilities.

5. Multi-Sectoral Collaboration:

Addressing the unfinished sanitation agenda requires multi-sectoral collaboration. Government agencies,

Conclusion

While India has made significant strides in improving sanitation, the agenda remains unfinished. Achieving universal access to safe sanitation and proper hygiene practices requires sustained efforts, community engagement, and innovative solutions. By

NGOs, community-based organizations, private sector entities, and academia should work together to leverage their respective strengths, share resources, and foster innovation. Collaborative platforms and partnerships should be established to facilitate knowledge sharing, joint planning, and implementation of sanitation initiatives.

6. Emphasis on Education and Awareness:

Education plays a vital role in creating awareness and driving behaviour change. Incorporating sanitation and hygiene education in school curricula and community programs can foster a culture of cleanliness and good hygiene practices from an early age. Information campaigns should be tailored to reach diverse populations, including marginalized communities, to ensure that no one is left behind in the journey towards improved sanitation.

7. Monitoring and Evaluation:

Regular monitoring and evaluation are crucial to track progress, identify challenges, and make informed decisions. Robust data collection systems should be put in place to measure sanitation coverage, usage, and impact. This data can inform evidence-based policy formulation, targeted interventions, and resource allocation to areas that need greater attention.

addressing the challenges of open defecation, access to sanitation facilities, waste management, and women's safety, India can move closer to realizing its vision of a clean and healthy nation, ensuring a better quality of life for all its citizens.