

Cleaning up India

Open defecation free?

Mission accomplished on October 2nd. 'India has stopped open defecation' declared the PM on the 150th anniversary of Gandhi's birth¹

This claim has triggered wide public responses. Here we're not going to argue about gaps between targets and delayed implementation, or about new toilets which can't be used because they lack water; we overlook the difficulties of encouraging changes of behaviour, and will pass over the lost opportunity to retrain manual cleaners consigned to this work by their caste. There are other problems.

ODF is a term of art signifying 'the absence of visible faeces in the environment'². Visible to whom? Invisible faeces are flowing from many urban latrines into more or less open drains where they mingle with general waste in a way that is only too disgustingly visible to those who have to clear these drains. Whose environment? Invisible faeces surround homes without patta or with unproven patta which do not qualify for subsidised toilets. Municipal sanitation workers without access to toilets or changing rooms have to shit on the very same urban verges that they clean.

Do all these people not count as Indian?

Over and above invisible faeces, there are other difficulties when 'Swachh Bharat' encounters the ground realities of urban India. The transformation of waste collection and processing using subsidies from SB lacks systems thinking. It does not integrate new technology with the semi-informal systems it is only partially replacing. This can make waste disposal worse not better. When you clear half a dumpyard in order to construct a big composting hangar, where is the non-recyclable waste to be deposited? Onto a dumpyard that is now half the size and twice the height it used to be - spewing the worst waste over its restraining walls and emitting ever more toxic fumes? When you replace tractor trailers with 'ecological' battery-operated trucks without sorting out reliable recharging points, what happens to waste collection when the trucks don't have power? When the trucks are half the capacity of the trailers they have replaced, who pays for the extra time and cost of making twice the numbers of journeys to the dumpyard? When the trucks are designed with separate containers for wet and dry waste, is domestic waste segregation taken for granted? When after years of attempts at persuasion only a quarter of homes segregate waste, who does this extra work? How is the new stream of non-medical waste which is nonetheless dangerous to health handled? We are talking about a life cycle's worth of soiled substances – diapers, sanitary napkins, incontinence pads? Is this wet or dry waste? It's wet all right but is it biodegradable and so destined for the disposal and composting system for food waste? And what happens to all the urban livestock feeding off edible waste if it is now all to be collected for composting?

SB also traces the deliberate extinction of a post-independence labour regime. Municipalities, whether fighting or complicit with tax evasion, whether they are votaries or critics of new public management, whatever the directed subsidies they receive from the central government's scheme, have to privatise and contractualise ever more of the waste-collecting sector. A woman substituting

¹ <https://www.newdelhitimes.com/100-odf-reality-or-myth/>

² <https://qz.com/india/1550401/is-india-cleaner-after-modis-swachh-bharat/>

temporarily for her mother in the municipal workforce on an ad hoc contract, then thrown out when her mother dies and subsequently employed by a private company to do exactly the same work sees her pay drop from Rs 15,000 with work rights to Rs 7-8,000 before PF is deducted – and for a longer shift. This is the Incredible India in which indecent work is yielding to grossly indecent work.

There's no doubt that SB holds transformative promise. But unless and until technology and organisation are realistically thought through with respect to ground realities in which complex formal-informal ways of handling waste have developed to cope with its massive proliferation, SB runs the risk of deepening the very problems it is apparently designed to solve.