

## Dirt and Dignity

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In recent days a controversy has developed around the placement of Mahatma Gandhi's statue next to a dustbin at the Madame Tussauds Wax Museum in London. An Indian visitor's letter of protest has resulted in widespread media attention on the museum's handling of the whole episode. While the indignation at such callousness towards the Mahatma's figure is understandable, its curious juxtaposition with the dustbin begs a more important question.

Gandhi had a rather un-Indian obsession with personal and public hygiene. The predominant view in our society has been one of revulsion towards refuse which has resulted in deeply entrenched cultural perceptions. It is in this sense that proximity to a dustbin is viewed as an insult to one's persona. Carried out to its extreme, this cultural value has resulted in an abhorrence that continues to haunt Indian society – the delegation of the handling of filth to those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. In both his personal practice and public message, Gandhi sought to radically alter this social order. Addressing the vexed question of sanitation and hygiene was fundamental to such a social transformation.

As evident in his *Autobiography*, from his early years, Gandhi had developed a strong sense of justice. While this was a trait shared with many a nationalist leader, his keen attention to questions of health and hygiene was unique. Writing a quarter-century after the Calcutta Congress he had attended in 1901, Gandhi recalled that while others did not mind the stench and dirt of the few latrines available, "the recollection of their stink still oppresses me". There he had picked up a broom and set about cleaning a latrine, but failed to induce others to do the same. After returning from South Africa, by the moral force of his example, Gandhi became the undisputed leader of the Indian freedom struggle. In a rapid widening of its representative nature, he transformed the Congress from an elite debating society into a mass organisation. Now his message was noticed if not entirely complied with.

Beyond his leadership of the political campaigns, Gandhi's genius lay in recognising that India's political goals could not be separated from internal reform and a fundamental transformation of society. Swaraj, for Gandhi, was not mere political independence from the British but signified a vibrant society of individuals each of whom was truly free to lead a fulfilling and dignified life. Such a conception of swaraj necessitated a capacity for ruthless self-examination. Thus, while he dismissed Katherine Mayo's notorious *Mother India* as a drain inspector's report, Gandhi pointed out that it was a book that Indians could read with profit. Beyond mere anger at Mayo's half-truths, Gandhi wanted it to "serve as a spur to much greater effort ... to rid society of all cause of reproach". A practical programme to rework the social order also required much experimentation. The primary sites of all such experiments, including sanitation work, were the ashrams that Gandhi established in Ahmedabad and Sevagram.

Gandhi placed tremendous importance on cleanliness since a healthy mind necessitated a healthy body and a clean environment. His position on the general question of hygiene can be best seen in his enormous attention to a taboo subject, the disposal of human faeces. In Gandhi's view, excrement was an inalienable part of human life. Instead of ignoring this fact, he demanded that we pay attention to its ramifications on individuals and society at large. To begin with, Gandhi demanded that excrement be disposed in a responsible manner to avoid disease. At his ashrams, every inmate was enjoined to learn the 'art of scavenging' and tend to the trench latrines in use. When most leaders would not bother themselves with such issues, Gandhi consistently and publicly espoused the correct disposal of human excrement and conversion into useful manure. More

importantly, by making everyone participate in this exercise, Gandhi was directly attacking the degradation of traditional caste stipulations and pointing to the dignity of manual labour.

The problems that Gandhi addressed and the solutions he advocated often left the rest of the Congress leadership perplexed. This lack of comprehension was due to a fundamental difference in approaches and continues to be a major source of misunderstanding of Gandhi. While apparently primitive compared to a modern flush toilet, Gandhi's use of a trench latrine had a sound rationale behind it. Gandhi was keenly aware of the limited resources available to most Indians and any solution had to be within the reach of the majority, if not everyone. It is this deeply democratic principle that led him to focus on the needs of rural India which suffered utter neglect and was in urgent need of social and economic transformation. In particular, at the top of his agenda for India's numerous villages was public hygiene and sanitation which were inexorably tied to the brutal and degrading practice of untouchability.

Gandhi was deeply anguished by the state of public hygiene in India. The jibe by an old colonial hand that India's villages were nothing but 'dung heaps' hurt him deeply and he often recalled it to goad Indians into action. In the late-1930's, after he had formally retired from the Congress, Gandhi worked through his constructive organisations to take the annual Congress sessions to the countryside for the first time. In the process he wanted to impress upon the largely urban leadership that agrarian India needed immediate attention. At the same time he wanted to expose rural Indians to the possibilities of a better life that was within their reach if only they would bestir themselves.

While today the two rural Congress sessions at Faizpur (1936) and Haripura (1938) are remembered for Nandalal Bose's remarkable experiments in public art, at the time there were more salutary lessons on display. At Faizpur, for the first time, Congress volunteers led by Appa Patwardhan took over responsibility for hygiene and sanitation. The arrangements at Haripura were even more remarkable. Despite the lakhs of visitors who thronged the Congress arena, the entire area was kept scrupulously clean, thanks to simple and innovative sanitary arrangements and a veritable army of 1,300 volunteers lead by the redoubtable Jugatram Dave. While the media grumbled about the inconveniences of a rural Congress session, the constructive workers felt that the sanitation experiment was eminently successful. The economic philosopher J. C. Kumarappa opined that "Haripura demonstrated beyond all doubt how effectively this dire problem of India can be solved if every person will give half a minute's thought every day to cover up dirt". Indeed, these exercises in public hygiene were meant to be object lessons that could be replicated around the country. However, despite his immense efforts Gandhi failed to reshape the wider Indian view on filth and pollution. Except for an honourable few, for most of us manual scavenging continues to be the proverbial elephant in the room.

In 1968-69, during the Gandhi centenary year, a young college graduate found himself working with the Balmiki Mukti Cell of the Bihar Gandhi Centenary Celebrations Committee. What he saw during the course of a year working with manual scavengers left an indelible impression on his mind. It made Bindeshwar Pathak dedicate his life to the liberation of manual scavengers. Today, Pathak's Sulabh Shauchalaya programme is recognised worldwide for its combination of technical innovation and an unwavering moral commitment to human dignity. However, beyond such exceptions, the vital link that Gandhi established between filth and human dignity has remained largely ignored in our country. Indeed one could argue that for Gandhi, the dustbin would not be a symbol of filth and denigration. He would have claimed that it should be viewed as a positive embodiment of the injunction : 'cleanliness is next to godliness'. Rather, it is the ecological mindlessness of the flush toilet for a few and the utter unavailability of dignified sanitation for the rest that would have deeply pained Gandhi.