



Promoting cleanliness as a civic duty: Gandhian principles driving the Swachh Bharat Mission forward

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Abstract

Cleanliness and sanitation have long been critical challenges in India, impacting public health and social well-being. The Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM), launched by the Government of India in 2014, aims to create a cleaner and healthier environment through widespread behavioral change and infrastructure development. This study explores how Gandhian principles—particularly those emphasizing civic responsibility, non-violence, and self-discipline—serve as a philosophical foundation that drives the mission's success. Using a mixed-methods approach, including policy analysis, case studies of community-led sanitation initiatives, and surveys measuring public participation, this research examines the alignment between Gandhian ethics and the practical implementation of SBM strategies. The findings reveal that embedding Gandhian values in public messaging and grassroots mobilization has significantly enhanced community ownership and participation in cleanliness drives. Moreover, the study highlights the importance of viewing cleanliness not merely as a government mandate but as a shared civic duty inspired by Gandhian ideals. The paper concludes that reinforcing such cultural and ethical frameworks is vital for the sustainable success of sanitation programs and can serve as a model for other public health initiatives. Implications for policy-makers include integrating ethical education into sanitation campaigns to foster long-term behavioral change.

Keywords: Swachh Bharat Mission, Gandhian Principles, Civic Duty, cleanliness, public health, behavioral change, sanitation, community participation

Introduction

Cleanliness has historically been more than just a matter of hygiene in India; it has carried deep cultural, spiritual, and social significance. However, despite these long-standing values, India has faced persistent challenges related to sanitation, waste management, and public hygiene, which have had profound impacts on public health, urban development, and the overall quality of life. According to the World Health Organization, poor sanitation contributes to nearly 432,000 diarrheal deaths annually in India, making it one of the leading causes of mortality, especially among children. Additionally, open defecation—a major public health hazard—has been prevalent in many rural and urban areas, with the Census of India 2011 reporting that approximately 54.5% of households did not have access to toilets. These statistics underscore the critical need for sustained and effective cleanliness initiatives.

Recognizing the urgent demand for change, the Government of India launched the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) in October 2014. This national campaign aims to eliminate open defecation, improve solid waste management, and promote a culture of cleanliness across the country. The SBM aspires not only to construct toilets and improve infrastructure but also to instill a sense of civic responsibility among citizens, motivating them to actively participate in maintaining their communities' hygiene. Since its inception, the mission has seen significant milestones, including the declaration of over 600,000 villages as Open Defecation Free (ODF) and the construction of over 110 million toilets across India by 2020. The government's investment of over \$30 billion in sanitation infrastructure and awareness campaigns has been unprecedented in scale. While the infrastructural achievements are impressive, the behavioral and cultural transformation necessary for long-

term sustainability of cleanliness efforts remains a challenge. This is where Gandhian principles come into the forefront. Mahatma Gandhi, often regarded as the Father of the Nation, emphasized cleanliness as a moral and civic duty, integral to the dignity and progress of individuals and society. His concept of "Swachhata" was not merely about physical cleanliness but encompassed purity of mind and ethics. Gandhi's emphasis on self-discipline, non-violence, and community participation aligns deeply with the objectives of SBM, making his philosophy a guiding force behind the mission's design and implementation.

In existing literature, there is substantial recognition of the role of Gandhian philosophy in shaping India's socio-political movements. Scholars have often examined Gandhi's vision for rural sanitation and his personal practice of manual scavenging and cleaning, which symbolized the breaking of social taboos related to caste and labor. However, contemporary research tends to focus more on the technical, economic, or infrastructural aspects of sanitation campaigns, with relatively fewer studies exploring the direct influence of Gandhian ethics on the success of modern initiatives like SBM. For example, many case studies document improved health outcomes and economic benefits from SBM interventions but do not delve deeply into the cultural mobilization strategies inspired by Gandhi's teachings.

Moreover, studies on public participation in sanitation have pointed out a critical gap: while awareness campaigns increase knowledge, they do not always translate into sustained behavioral change. This suggests that interventions focusing solely on infrastructure and awareness may fall short without incorporating deeper value-based motivation. Research in behavioral science and public policy increasingly stresses the importance of

embedding moral and cultural values in environmental campaigns to foster intrinsic motivation. In this context, the integration of Gandhian principles offers a unique and potentially powerful framework for understanding and enhancing civic engagement in cleanliness drives.

The objectives of this study are thus threefold: first, to analyze how Gandhian principles have been interpreted and operationalized within the Swachh Bharat Mission; second, to assess the impact of these principles on community participation and behavioral change; and third, to explore the implications of this alignment for the sustainability of sanitation initiatives in India. Through a combination of policy analysis, examination of grassroots case studies, and survey data on public attitudes, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the intersection between ethical philosophy and public health policy.

This paper is structured as follows: The next section will provide a detailed review of the literature on sanitation challenges in India, Gandhian philosophy relating to cleanliness and civic duty, and the implementation strategies of SBM. Following this, the methodology section will outline the research design, data sources, and analytical approaches used in the study. The findings section will present insights into the role of Gandhian values in driving SBM outcomes, supported by empirical evidence. Finally, the discussion and conclusion sections will synthesize the results, highlight policy implications, and suggest directions for future research.

By bridging the gap between ethical philosophy and practical sanitation efforts, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how cultural values can shape public health interventions. It demonstrates that promoting cleanliness as a civic duty, rooted in Gandhian ideals, is not only historically resonant but also critically relevant to India's present and future sanitation landscape. Given the ongoing challenges of urbanization, environmental sustainability, and public health, such an integrated approach offers a promising pathway for transformative change.

Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches to comprehensively explore the role of Gandhian principles in driving the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM). The integration of multiple data sources allowed for a deeper understanding of both the measurable impacts of the mission and the cultural and philosophical underpinnings that shape community participation.

The quantitative component of the research was survey-based. The survey aimed to gather data on public attitudes toward cleanliness, perceptions of civic duty, and awareness of Gandhian values as related to the SBM. A structured questionnaire was developed consisting of closed-ended questions measuring demographic variables, participation in cleanliness activities, and belief in civic responsibility. Likert-scale items assessed respondents' agreement with statements about the importance of cleanliness and the influence of Gandhian teachings. The questionnaire was pilot tested on a small sample to ensure clarity and reliability, with minor revisions made based on feedback.

For the sampling method, a stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure representativeness across different socio-economic groups, urban and rural settings,

and regions within India. The population included adults aged 18 and above, representing both genders and varying education levels. A sample size of 800 respondents was selected, based on calculations to achieve a 95% confidence level with a 5% margin of error, sufficient for generalizing findings to the broader population involved in or affected by the SBM.

In addition to the survey, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews and case studies. Key informant interviews were conducted with SBM officials, community leaders, sanitation workers, and NGO representatives involved in cleanliness campaigns. These interviews explored how Gandhian principles were interpreted and applied at the grassroots level, challenges faced in motivating participation, and perceptions of behavioral change. Interview questions were open-ended, allowing for rich, detailed responses that captured diverse perspectives. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed for analysis.

Case studies of three distinct communities—one urban slum in Delhi, one rural village in Madhya Pradesh, and one semi-urban area in Maharashtra—were selected purposively to represent different contexts in which SBM has been implemented. These case studies involved observations of cleanliness drives, participation in community meetings, and review of local sanitation records to understand practical manifestations of civic duty inspired by Gandhian values.

For data analysis, quantitative survey data were entered into SPSS software. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographic profiles and participation rates. Inferential statistics, including correlation and regression analysis, were performed to examine the relationships between belief in Gandhian principles, sense of civic duty, and active engagement in cleanliness activities. These analyses helped identify significant predictors of participation and behavioral change.

Qualitative data from interviews and case studies were analyzed using thematic analysis. NVivo software facilitated coding of transcripts, allowing for systematic identification of recurring themes related to Gandhian ethics, motivation, barriers to participation, and community dynamics. Themes were cross-checked by two researchers to ensure consistency and reliability. Triangulation of qualitative and quantitative findings helped validate the results and provided a comprehensive picture of the underlying mechanisms influencing the success of SBM.

Ethical considerations were rigorously observed throughout the research. All participants were provided with clear information about the study's purpose, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by assigning unique codes to respondents and securely storing data. Participants had the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Special care was taken to ensure that vulnerable populations, such as sanitation workers, were treated with respect and their voices authentically represented. Ethical approval was sought and obtained from an institutional review board prior to commencing fieldwork.

In summary, this research's methodological framework was designed to capture both the measurable outcomes of cleanliness efforts and the cultural and ethical dimensions that drive citizen engagement. The mixed-methods approach, combining representative survey data with in-

depth qualitative insights, provided a robust and replicable model for future studies examining the intersection of philosophy, behavior, and public health initiatives.

Results

This section presents the findings of the study derived from both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews and case studies. The results are organized under key themes corresponding to public participation, perceptions of Gandhian principles, behavioral change, and community dynamics related to the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM).

Survey Findings: Public Participation and Perceptions

The survey, completed by 800 respondents across urban, semi-urban, and rural settings, revealed a high level of awareness about the Swachh Bharat Mission, with 93% of participants reporting familiarity with the campaign. Among these, 78% indicated active participation in cleanliness drives or related activities such as waste segregation, use of toilets, and public awareness efforts.

A strong sense of civic duty was reported by 68% of respondents, who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “Maintaining cleanliness in my community is a personal responsibility.” Furthermore, 65% of participants acknowledged that Gandhian values such as self-discipline, non-violence, and service to society influence their attitudes toward cleanliness.

Statistical analysis showed a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.54, p < 0.01$) between belief in Gandhian principles and reported participation in cleanliness activities. Regression analysis further indicated that belief in these values predicted 29% of the variance in participation levels, controlling for demographic factors such as age, education, and income.

Table 1: summarizes key survey statistics related to awareness, participation, and Gandhian value alignment.

Variable	Percentage (%)	Mean Score (Likert Scale 1-5)	Standard Deviation
Awareness of SBM	93	4.5	0.7
Participation in Cleanliness Activities	78	4.1	0.9
Sense of Civic Duty	68	4.0	1.0
Influence of Gandhian Principles	65	3.9	1.1

Behavioral Change and Sustainability

Respondents were also asked about changes in their sanitation behaviors since the launch of SBM. Approximately 72% reported increased use of toilets and decreased open defecation, especially in rural areas. Similarly, 60% noted improved waste management practices, such as segregation and proper disposal.

When asked about the motivation behind these changes, 57% cited government campaigns, while 43% emphasized personal and community values linked to Gandhian ideals. This indicates that while institutional efforts are important, intrinsic motivation rooted in ethical principles plays a crucial role.

Qualitative Findings: Insights from Interviews and Case Studies

The qualitative data reinforced these survey findings, offering nuanced understanding of how Gandhian principles manifest in the mission’s grassroots implementation.

Interviews with SBM officials highlighted that the campaign’s messaging intentionally invokes Gandhi’s legacy, portraying cleanliness as a moral obligation. Officials noted that slogans such as “Swachh Bharat, Swachh Jeevan” and “My Cleanliness, My Responsibility” are designed to resonate with Gandhi’s philosophy of self-reliance and non-violence.

Community leaders from the rural case study reported organizing “Swachhata rallies” where Gandhi’s quotes and life examples were shared to inspire participation. One village head described how villagers, initially resistant, gradually embraced cleanliness drives after relating the mission to Gandhi’s teachings on dignity and service.

Sanitation workers emphasized how Gandhi’s personal involvement in manual scavenging broke social stigmas, encouraging their acceptance and respect in society today. Many expressed pride in their work, linking it to a Gandhian ideal of serving the community selflessly.

Observations in urban and semi-urban sites revealed diverse engagement levels. While urban slum areas struggled with overcrowding and limited infrastructure, many residents showed enthusiasm for SBM activities, particularly when Gandhian values were invoked through local leaders. Semi-urban participants reflected on the mission as a way to restore social harmony and civic pride, often citing Gandhi’s emphasis on cleanliness as a path to nation-building.

Challenges and Barriers

Despite positive trends, challenges remained. Some interviewees noted that ingrained habits, social norms, and lack of continuous motivation impeded sustained behavioral change. A few community members admitted that cleanliness was still seen as a government responsibility rather than a personal duty, indicating the need for deeper cultural transformation.

Table 2: presents a summary of thematic findings from qualitative analysis, illustrating key facilitators and barriers identified across different community contexts.

Theme	Description	Examples
Gandhian Values as Motivation	Moral obligation, self-discipline, service	Use of Gandhi’s quotes in rallies
Community Participation	Collective action, leadership by example	Swachhata rallies, local champions
Social Stigma Reduction	Respect for sanitation workers, breaking taboos	Pride in manual scavenging work
Behavioral Barriers	Habitual resistance, perception of government role	Reluctance to maintain personal cleanliness
Infrastructure Challenges	Lack of adequate waste disposal and toilet access	Overcrowding in urban slums

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the significant role that Gandhian principles play in shaping public attitudes and behaviors related to cleanliness under the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM). The positive correlation between belief in Gandhian values and active participation in cleanliness initiatives underscores the power of ethical and cultural frameworks in motivating civic engagement. This supports the broader research objective of understanding how the philosophical foundation laid by Mahatma Gandhi continues to influence contemporary public health efforts in India.

The high levels of awareness and reported participation found in the survey demonstrate the reach and effectiveness of SBM's campaign strategies. However, the data also reveal that infrastructure development alone—such as the construction of toilets—does not guarantee sustained behavioral change. This echoes findings from previous sanitation studies, which have shown that while access is necessary, it is not sufficient to ensure long-term improvements without accompanying shifts in social norms and values. The integration of Gandhian principles within SBM's messaging appears to fill this gap by fostering intrinsic motivation, encouraging individuals to view cleanliness as a moral and civic duty rather than just a government mandate.

In existing literature, Gandhi's concept of "Swachhata" is understood not merely as physical cleanliness but as a holistic ethic encompassing personal responsibility, discipline, and social justice. This study's qualitative findings confirm that these ideas resonate deeply with communities, particularly when local leaders actively invoke Gandhi's legacy to inspire participation. This aligns with prior research emphasizing the importance of culturally relevant narratives in public health interventions. For instance, the role of ethical leadership and moral exemplars in behavior change has been well documented, and SBM's approach of connecting cleanliness to national pride and personal dignity reflects this understanding.

The qualitative data also shed light on the social transformation prompted by Gandhian values, particularly in reducing stigma around sanitation work. The pride expressed by sanitation workers who relate their roles to Gandhi's own efforts in manual scavenging represents a significant shift in social attitudes. This finding expands on earlier sociological studies that documented caste-based discrimination in sanitation work by highlighting how ethical frameworks can promote dignity and respect. Such transformations are essential for the sustainability of sanitation initiatives, as social acceptance empowers workers and enhances community cohesion.

Despite these positive trends, the study reveals persistent challenges that mirror those documented in other sanitation programs globally. Habitual resistance to change, especially in deeply entrenched behaviors like open defecation or littering, remains a barrier. The perception among some community members that cleanliness is primarily a government responsibility points to a partial internalization of civic duty. This gap suggests that while Gandhian values offer a compelling framework, ongoing education and community engagement are necessary to fully embed these principles into daily life.

Moreover, infrastructural limitations in densely populated urban slums underscore the need for integrated approaches that address both physical and social environments. Without adequate facilities, even the most motivated individuals may struggle to maintain cleanliness, highlighting the interplay between ethical motivation and practical feasibility. This supports calls in the literature for sanitation policies that are holistic, combining behavioral, cultural, and infrastructural components.

The study's findings have important implications for policymakers and practitioners. First, they suggest that sanitation campaigns should continue to leverage cultural and ethical narratives rooted in Gandhian philosophy to enhance public ownership and sustainability. Incorporating

Gandhi's teachings into educational curricula, community workshops, and media campaigns can strengthen the moral basis for cleanliness. Second, efforts to empower sanitation workers and address social stigmas should be prioritized, as these contribute to broader social equity and community resilience.

Future research could build on this study by exploring longitudinal changes in attitudes and behaviors to assess the lasting impact of Gandhian-inspired messaging. Additionally, comparative studies across different regions and socio-cultural contexts within India could elucidate how local variations affect the adoption of cleanliness as a civic duty. Investigating the role of youth engagement and digital media in spreading Gandhian values related to sanitation also presents a promising avenue for further exploration.

In conclusion, this research demonstrates that the success of the Swachh Bharat Mission is not solely dependent on infrastructural inputs but is deeply intertwined with the cultural and ethical ethos of the nation. Gandhian principles of self-discipline, service, and moral responsibility continue to provide a robust foundation for transforming cleanliness from a government initiative into a collective civic duty. This integration of philosophy and practice offers valuable lessons for sanitation programs in India and beyond, highlighting the enduring power of ethical leadership in public health and social change.

Conclusion

This study underscores the vital role that Gandhian principles play in promoting cleanliness as a civic duty within the framework of the Swachh Bharat Mission. The findings reveal that embedding Gandhi's values of self-discipline, service, and moral responsibility into sanitation campaigns significantly enhances public participation and fosters sustained behavioral change. While infrastructural improvements remain essential, the success of cleanliness initiatives depends equally on cultivating a cultural ethos that motivates individuals to take ownership of their environment. The research highlights how Gandhian ideals not only inspire individual action but also contribute to reducing social stigma around sanitation work, thereby strengthening community cohesion. Despite ongoing challenges related to habit formation and infrastructure constraints, the integration of ethical principles offers a powerful and sustainable pathway toward achieving national sanitation goals. This study affirms that the fusion of philosophy and practical policy is critical in transforming cleanliness from a governmental mandate into a shared, lifelong civic commitment, providing valuable insights for similar public health endeavors globally.

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