

Swachh Bharat Abhiyan: Prospects and Challenges

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Provisioning of drinking water and sanitation services are recognised as the responsibility of the states under the Constitution of India. However, Union Government programmes on sanitation have played a significant role in increasing access to sanitation facilities, especially in rural areas where the dependence on public provisioning of essential services is relatively higher than that in urban areas. The introduction of the Central Rural Sanitation Programme in 1986 and its revamping as Total Sanitation Campaign (TSC) in 1999, helped increase the coverage of household toilets in rural areas from 1% in 1981 (Census 1981) to 22% in 2001 (Census 2001) and 32.7% in 2011 (Census 2011). Subsequently, the *Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan* (NBA) in 2012, which succeeded TSC, aimed to accelerate sanitation coverage in rural areas to achieve the vision of '*Nirmal*' Bharat by 2022 with all Village Panchayats in the country attaining '*Nirmal*' status.

The *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan*, launched on 2nd of October this year, marks the beginning of the largest programme on sanitation by the Government in India till date. The programme aims to ensure access to sanitation facilities (including toilets, solid and liquid waste disposal systems and village cleanliness) and safe and adequate drinking water supply to every person by 2019, three years ahead of the deadline set by NBA (though NBA focused only on sanitation with the National Rural Drinking Water Programme covering drinking water in rural areas). Though the detailed guidelines for the programme are yet to be issued, a preliminary assessment of the programme can be made from the information available in the public domain.

Under the new programme, NBA will be re-structured into Swachh Bharat Mission with two sub-Missions - Swachh Bharat Mission (*Gramin*) and Swachh Bharat Mission (Urban). The two missions will fall under the Union Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation (for Rural) and the Union Ministry of Urban Development (for Urban). The unit costs for toilets will be enhanced for Individual Household Latrines (IHHLs) (from Rs. 10,000 to Rs. 12,000), school toilets (from Rs. 35,000 to Rs. 54,000), *anganwadi* toilets (from Rs. 8,000 to Rs. 20,000) and Community Sanitary Complexes (CSCs) (from Rs.2,00,000 to Rs.6,00,000). Given that one of the major impediments in increasing the coverage of toilets at a satisfactory pace has been the lack of funds, the proposed investment of Rs. 1.34 lakh crore for rural areas and Rs. 62,009 crore for urban areas over the next five years, as has been reported in the media recently, is likely to go a long way in achieving the goals set by the programme (though this overall investment is not expected to be made entirely by the government, with private sector players contributing some resources). However, it is also important to note that while the estimates of the total magnitude of funds for sanitation have increased substantially, the unit costs for IHHLs, the key

component of rural sanitation programmes has witnessed a marginal increase. The increase in the unit costs of IHHLs (i.e. of Rs.2,000) has been done to provide for water availability, including for storing, hand washing and cleaning of toilets.

Funding for these new initiatives will be through budgetary allocations, contributions to the *Swachh Bharat Kosh* and through commitments under Corporate Social responsibility (CSR). Another feature of the proposed programme is the setting up of a Special Purpose Vehicle within the Mission as a Company under the Company's Act. It will raise funds from Government and non-Government sources, including CSR funds and interalia also implement CSR projects. Public Private Partnerships (PPP) are also envisaged for construction of CSCs. It is likely that budgetary allocations for the programme will be made in the current financial year itself.

A significant departure from the previous programme, NBA, is the de-linking of rural sanitation with the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). Though this proposal is still under consideration, it would be a welcome measure as its acceptance is likely to address the problem of delayed availability of a part of the funds (for construction of IHHLs) from MGNREGA. Additionally, the under the new programme, it is proposed to replace *Nirmal Gram Puraskar* with *Swachh Bharat Puraskar* with a widened focus to include block and district level benchmarks for coverage. In recognition of the need to strengthen monitoring mechanism, the programme will monitor both outputs (construction) and outcomes (usage). Another welcome measure is the proposed flexibility to States with regard to use of funds by allowing interchangeability of funds between drinking water and sanitation so as to ensure that funds do not lie idle and targets are not starved of funds in either of the two sectors.

However, it would also be pertinent to reflect on some of the challenges that may hinder effective implementation of the programme and attainment of the goals envisaged. The reduction in the budget of the Information Education and Communication (IEC) component (from 15 percent to 8 percent), which is critical to trigger behavioral change to ensure usage of toilets, is a matter of concern. Additionally, the lack of any resources for maintenance of school toilets and community sanitary complexes could result in rapid deterioration and subsequent non-usage of these over time, severely impacting the sustainability of the programme. Another serious concern that has been recognised but not fully addressed in the programme pertains to the shortage of staff for implementation of both water and sanitation programmes.

The launch of the *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* also provides an opportunity to address some concerns from the perspective of social inclusion and equity. An overarching concern in this regard is the reliance on PPP, which could constrain the ability of the government to address the already existing inequities based on caste, class and gender in both rural water and sanitation. In fact, it has been argued that the experience of PPP in sectors such as drinking

water has often raised concerns, particularly for the vulnerable and disadvantaged sections of the population.

While the draft Action Plan of the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation explicitly recognizes some critical gender concerns with regard to sanitation, the need for enclosed bathing spaces within homes remains un-addressed, which has been a threat to the privacy and security for women. Moreover, the construction of Community Sanitary Complexes being contingent on a mandatory ten percent community contribution and the willingness of the Gram Panchayat to take the responsibility of ownership and a sustainable operation and maintenance system could prove to be yet another hurdle in achieving the goals of this mission in the long run. Lower priority to public toilets is undesirable from a gender perspective. Likewise, the proposed unit costs for construction of toilets, especially household toilets, would be inadequate for making them accessible to persons with disabilities; features such as grab bars and ramps require significantly higher unit costs than what has been provided under *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan*.

The high degree of policy priority accorded to sanitation with the introduction of *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* could go a long way in achieving an open defecation free India in the coming years. A number of concerns with the proposed programme do exist, but these can be addressed in due course. It is hoped that the concerned stakeholders including the various line ministries and states would own the programme to ensure its successful implementation.

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