

Cleanliness, godliness

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Bindeshwar Pathak, social reformer and champion of proper toilets in India, died on August 15th, aged 80

IT ALL BEGAN with a dare. Bindeshwar Pathak, then seven or so, wondered why the thin little woman who came through the back door sometimes, selling bamboo utensils to his Brahmin family, was called "untouchable". He wondered why his grandmother sprinkled holy Ganga water over the floor where the woman had walked, and was told she had polluted it. So, one day, he dared to touch her sari, to see what would happen to his body.

Nothing happened to it. But uproar broke out in the house. They called in the *pandit*; he said Bindeshwar must be banished. His mother intervened to save him from that, but the rest of the priest's remedy was almost as terrible. He had to plunge into cold Ganga water and, much worse, drink a mixture of milk, ghee, curd, cow urine and cow dung, to purify himself. Grandmother mixed it up fiercely and forced it down him.

Later he learned the reason for it. The poor, creeping woman belonged to the Valmiki community, the lowest caste. Its women mostly made a living by collecting night soil, cleaning it out from buckets and dry-pit toilets with a metal brush and pan but often with bare hands. They then carried it on their heads, in baskets, to some far place. For this work they were shunned, even after they had bathed. They could not use the wells unless some "clean" soul drew water for them. Shopkeepers threw them the goods they bought, and shook water over their money. It was fine to touch a dog, but not these human beings, who were exactly like him.

From 1950 the notion of "untouchable" was banned in India. It continued because their work did; because most Indians, if they had toilets in their homes, had pits that needed cleaning. The Pathak family did not employ anyone for that because, in their roomy and comfortable house, they had no toilet. It was not in the least unusual; most Indians had none then. Each day at 4am Bindeshwar would hear the women of the family set off to relieve themselves, safely in the dark and the trees.

So began his obsession with sanitation, which soon became a mission. The equation was simple. If Indians had proper flush toilets, they could clean them themselves. If the scavengers were not needed, they could, with training and support, find other jobs and lead dignified lives. India could become cleaner, healthier (since pit toilets spread disease) and, in time, more equal. Liberation of scavengers had been Mohatma Gandhi's dream, even more strongly than independence; now it was his. Helping another human being was a prayer to God. In 1970 he set up an organisation, Sulabh Shauchalaya, meaning simply "accessible toilet". Officials might not care to discuss his work over tea, but he sometimes felt he loved it more than his children or his wife.

The key to everything was his cheap pour-flush toilet, essentially a sieve-like clay-lined pit, flushable with only a litre of water, from which black- or grey-water leached into the soil and in which the dry solids gradually degraded into an odourless mulch that could fertilise fields. He designed it in 1969; in 1973 a local town in Bihar ordered two demonstration models for the municipal compound. They caught on. By 2020, 110m had been installed across the country. In 1974 he built India's first public lavatory, with 48 seats, urinals and 20 bathrooms. A pee cost one rupee, a poo two. When it opened in the city of Patna, 500 people used it on the first day. By this year almost any bus stand, railway station or market had its own *sulabh shauchalaya*; around 20m used them each day. The revenue subsidised smaller community toilets out in the villages and toilets in schools, which encouraged girls to attend.

That success had been born in struggle, some of it deliberate. Shortly after university he spent three months among scavengers in the town of Bettiah, enduring with them the stench, the humiliation and the filth that leaked into his hair. One day he saw a small boy killed by a bull because, since he was untouchable, no one would help him. This redoubled his determination to make his mission national, though few listened. His family were appalled by his peculiar, shameful obsession; his father-in-law disowned him. He ran out of funds to build the toilets, and had to sell his wife's ornaments to keep going.

As his inventions spread, however, so the scavengers began to rise. He established centres for the women where, in identical pale-blue saris, they could learn to read, write and open bank accounts, and could train as embroiderers and candlemakers. He also took them on trips to the Nathdwara temple, which banned such women, and the 5-star Maurya Sheraton restaurant in Delhi. At both places, those in charge begged him to take the women away; in his gentlest Gandhian mode, he refused. By this year, by his estimate, some 200,000 women had been liberated.

Others, too, needed his help. He took on the case of the 10,000 widows of Vrindavan, abandoned by their families to live on mattresses in decrepit government shelters in the city of Krishna's childhood. Their condition was dire, but he gave them a little money each, medical care, and help to learn reading and writing. As with the scavengers, he also raised them up socially, urging them to swap their mourning white for forbidden bright clothes and to celebrate Holi, the festival of colour. He himself wore a scarlet jacket almost always, the vivid centre of crowds.

Awards came thick and fast. The prime minister, Narendra Modi, was a firm fan, declaring that toilets might be more important than temples. Change occurred; but large gaps remained. Although dry-pit toilets had been banned in 1993, two decades later 9.6m were still hand-emptied in India. In 2020 a fifth of the population still defecated in the open air, lining fields and cuttings as the dawn trains went past and dropped their own load of faeces on the track. And this in a country that was aiming to go to Mars.

Yet Dr Pathak was confident things would improve, if the will was there. One day all Indians, united in cleanliness, would worship together, dine together and bathe in the same pond. Even the likes of his grandmother would sit with the people they had thought filthy, and apply no Ganga water afterwards. ■

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