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From Policy to Practice: Examining the Success and Challenges of Swachh Bharat Mission

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Abstract:
The Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM), launched by the Government of India in 2014, is one of the most ambitious sanitation initiatives aimed at achieving an Open Defecation Free (ODF) India. By focusing on infrastructure development, behavioral change, and waste management, the mission has significantly improved sanitation coverage, reduced open defecation, and enhanced public health outcomes. This article explores the journey of the Swachh Bharat Mission from its policy formulation to its practical implementation, examining the challenges, achievements, and lessons learned along the way. The study highlights SBM's key successes, including the construction of over 120 million toilets, a notable decline in infant mortality, and enhanced solid and liquid waste management. Case studies from various states demonstrate the effectiveness of community participation in sustaining sanitation efforts. However, challenges such as behavioral inertia, maintenance of toilet infrastructure, and waste management inefficiencies persist. The study provides policy recommendations for improving the efficiency and sustainability of SBM, emphasizing the need for inclusive approaches, robust monitoring mechanisms, and better resource management. Ensuring long-term success requires continuous engagement with communities, stronger institutional frameworks, and integration with broader developmental programs.

Key Word**:** *Swachh Bharat Mission; Open Defecation Free; Sanitation coverage; Behavioral change; Community Participation Approach*

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I. Introduction

India, with its vast population and diverse socio-economic landscape, has long grappled with the challenges of inadequate sanitation and hygiene. As per the 2011 Census, only 34 per cent of rural households had access to toilets, leaving approximately 550 million people to defecate in the open. This lack of proper sanitation facilities has been linked to severe public health issues, including diarrheal diseases, malnutrition, and stunted growth in children. Recognizing the urgency of the situation, the Government of India launched the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) on October 2, 2014, coinciding with the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, who championed the cause of cleanliness and sanitation. The mission aimed to achieve universal sanitation coverage and eliminate open defecation by October 2, 2019, through the construction of toilets, promotion of behavioral change, and improved waste management.

The Swachh Bharat Mission was implemented in two phases: Swachh Bharat Mission (Gramin) for rural areas and Swachh Bharat Mission (Urban) for urban areas. Over the years, SBM has made significant strides in improving sanitation coverage, with over 120 million individual household toilets constructed and more than 700,000 villages declared Open Defecation Free (ODF). However, the journey has not been without challenges, including resistance to behavioral change, poor-quality infrastructure, and issues with sustainability. This study explores the journey of the Swachh Bharat Mission, from its policy formulation to its practical implementation, highlighting the key achievements, challenges, and lessons learned. It also examines the critical role of community participation in driving the mission's success and provides recommendations for improving its efficiency and sustainability.

II. Objectives of the Study

- To examine the role of community participation and behavioral change in achieving Open Defecation Free (ODF) status and sustaining sanitation practices.
- To identify the challenges in achieving and maintaining Open Defecation Free (ODF) status and suggest policy recommendations for improving sanitation initiatives.

III. Policy Framework and Objectives of Swachh Bharat Mission

The Swachh Bharat Mission was designed as a comprehensive policy framework to address the multifaceted challenges of sanitation in India. The mission's primary objectives included:

i. **Elimination of Open Defecation:** The mission aimed to construct Individual Household Toilets (IHHLs) and community toilets to eliminate the practice of open defecation, particularly in rural areas.
ii. **Behavioral Change:** Recognizing that infrastructure alone would not solve the problem, the mission emphasized the importance of behavioral change through Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) campaigns.
iii. **Solid and Liquid Waste Management (SLWM):** The mission sought to improve the management of solid and liquid waste in both rural and urban areas, promoting sustainable sanitation practices.
iv. **Capacity Building:** The mission focused on building the capacity of local governments, communities, and stakeholders to ensure the sustainability of sanitation initiatives.
v. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** The mission established a robust monitoring and evaluation framework to track progress, identify gaps, and ensure accountability.

IV. Result Policy Framework and Objectives of Swachh Bharat Mission

i. **Open Defecation Free (ODF) Status**:
The most notable achievement of SBM is the significant reduction in open defecation. As of October 2024, over 700,000 villages have been declared ODF and as of March 2025, 563,919 villages have attained ODF Plus status (*sbmgdashboard)*. A village attains Open Defecation Free (ODF) status if the community stops open defecation. Whereas an ODF Plus village is defined as a village which sustain its Open Defecation Free (ODF) Status, ensures solid and liquid waste management and is visually clean. This has been a monumental shift, considering the deep-rooted cultural and behavioral norms associated with sanitation.

ii. **Improved Toilet Coverage**:
The SBM has led to a substantial increase in access to sanitation facilities. In 2014, only 39 per cent of households had access to toilets. By 2019, this figure had risen to 100 per cent. Over 120 million individual household toilets have been constructed, particularly benefiting rural areas and disadvantaged families. (Ministry of Housing & Urban Affairs 2024).

iii. **Behavioral Change and Awareness**:
The mission has successfully raised awareness about sanitation and hygiene practices through extensive Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) campaigns. This has led to a cultural shift in attitudes towards cleanliness.

iv. **Reduction in Infant Mortality**:
Improved sanitation has had a direct impact on public health. Studies have shown a strong correlation between better sanitation and a decline in infant mortality rates. For instance, districts with more than 30 per cent toilets constructed under SBM correspond with a 5.3 lower Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) and a 6.8 lower Under-five Mortality Rate (U5MR) (Chakrabarti, S et.al. 2024)

v. **Waste Management Improvements**:
The SBM has made significant strides in solid waste management. Cities have achieved waste processing rates of over 75 per cent, and door-to-door waste collection is now implemented in over 97 per cent of urban wards. Over 5,02,454 villages have arrangements for solid waste management, and 5,21,887 villages have arrangements for liquid waste management. (*sbmgdashboard*)

vi. **Economic Impact**:
The mission has not only improved health outcomes but also generated economic benefits. A UNICEF study indicated that achieving ODF status in villages has saved households around ₹50,000 annually (UNICEF India, 2017).

Thus, the Swachh Bharat Mission has undoubtedly transformed India's sanitation landscape, making significant progress in improving public health, hygiene, and overall quality of life for millions of citizens.

V. Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) Approach

Community participation plays a crucial role in the successful implementation of the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) in rural areas of India. Since SBM aims to create Open Defecation Free (ODF) villages, improve sanitation infrastructure, promote hygiene awareness, and ensure waste management, the active involvement of the local community is essential to make these efforts sustainable and effective.

i. Creating Awareness and Behavioral Change

- Community members, especially local leaders, teachers, Self-Help Groups (SHGs), and village elders, spread awareness about the importance of sanitation and hygiene.
- Through peer influence, villagers are more likely to adopt good practices if they see their neighbors, family, and friends actively participating in sanitation programs.
- Traditional communication tools such as folk songs, street plays, and village meetings are used to convey messages about toilet usage, handwashing, and waste disposal, making the campaign relatable.

ii. Ownership and Responsibility

- When communities are involved in planning, implementation, and monitoring, they develop a sense of ownership over sanitation infrastructure such as toilets, waste disposal units, and water sources.
- Community ownership ensures better maintenance of these facilities in the long run, reducing dependence on external agencies.

iii. Resource Mobilization

- Communities contribute labor, local materials, and small financial contributions to construct toilets, soak pits, and compost pits. This participatory approach reduces costs and ensures customized local solutions.
- Panchayats, local voluntary organizations, and youth groups help mobilize funds and resources for sanitation drives and awareness campaigns.

iv. Social Monitoring and Peer Pressure

- Community-led monitoring through village committees ensures that toilets are used regularly and open defecation is discouraged.
- Villages adopt reward and penalty systems, where households maintaining cleanliness are appreciated, while those violating norms face social pressure or mild penalties.
- In some successful cases, villages have introduced "Nigrani Samitis" (watch groups) where community members ensure cleanliness standards are maintained.

v. Women and Youth Participation

- Involving women's self-help groups and youth clubs creates a more inclusive approach, addressing gender-specific sanitation needs and empowering women to lead the cleanliness movement.
- Schools, anganwadis, and youth volunteers act as change agents to influence families and peers.

VI. Case Studies: Successful Implementation of Swachh Bharat Mission through Community Participation Across India

i. Nadia District in West Bengal

Nadia District in West Bengal, located in the southern part of Bengal, is historically considered a backward area. However, it became the first district in the state to be declared Open Defecation Free (ODF) through the innovative "Sabar Souchagar" (Toilets for All) campaign. This community-driven initiative involved a collaborative effort from the district administration, school teachers, Anganwadi workers, religious leaders, and local NGOs. Their combined efforts spread awareness and fostered a sense of ownership within the community, resulting in 100 per cent toilet coverage. Nadia's longstanding emphasis on hygiene and sanitation played a crucial role in the success of this campaign. The district, being deeply invested in the importance of sanitation, ensured that even young children were taught the value of proper sanitation. The project, however, wasn't easy, requiring years of planning and campaigning to change ingrained habits. Schools and self-help groups were key in convincing villagers to abandon open defecation. Innovative approaches, such as having children take an oath every Monday to avoid defecating in the open, proved effective. To ensure long-term success, the administration created the "*para najardari committee*," a group that monitors villages to prevent a return to old practices. The campaign's impact has been significant, with a reduction in waterborne diseases and malnutrition levels, setting an example under the Swachh Bharat Mission.

ii. Dungarpur, in Rajasthan

Dungarpur, a tribal-dominated district in Rajasthan, faced significant challenges with open defecation due to poverty, low literacy, and traditional social norms. To tackle this issue, the district administration engaged local tribal leaders, village elders, and women's self-help groups to raise awareness. Regular "Swachhta Chaupals" (cleanliness meetings) were held, encouraging villagers to discuss the health risks of open defecation. School children played a pivotal role as sanitation ambassadors, spreading messages about toilet use

to their families. Communities took responsibility for constructing toilets using locally available materials, and village-level monitoring committees ensured regular use and maintenance. This community-driven, culturally sensitive approach led Dungarpur to achieve Open Defecation Free (ODF) status well ahead of the national deadline. The key to the success of this initiative was the behavioral change it inspired within the community.

iii. Hiwre Bazaar, a village in Maharashtra

Hiwre Bazaar, a village in Maharashtra, has emerged as a model for successfully implementing the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) through active community participation. The village, led by its proactive sarpanch, Popatrao Pawar, transformed itself by prioritizing cleanliness and sanitation as a collective responsibility. The journey began with raising awareness about the importance of hygiene and the harmful effects of open defecation. The community was mobilized through regular meetings, door-to-door campaigns, and demonstrations, ensuring everyone understood the mission's goals. Hiwre Bazaar focused on building toilets in every household, with villagers contributing labor and resources, fostering a sense of ownership. The gram panchayat provided financial assistance and technical support, ensuring no household was left behind. To sustain the initiative, the village implemented strict rules, such as fines for littering and incentives for maintaining cleanliness. The community also embraced waste management practices, including composting and recycling, turning waste into resources. Public spaces were regularly cleaned, and trees were planted to enhance the environment. The success of Hiwre Bazaar lies in its people-centric approach, where every villager became a stakeholder in the mission. Today, the village stands as a shining example of how community participation can drive the Swachh Bharat Mission, inspiring others to follow suit.

iv. The Story of Sakkimangalam Selvi – Madurai, Tamil Nadu

K. Selvi, popularly known as Sakkimangalam Selvi, has become a beacon of change in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, through her relentless efforts to promote sanitation and eradicate open defecation. A class 12 dropout and mother of three, Selvi was inspired to take action after experiencing the humiliation of open defecation while her own toilet was under construction. Her personal struggle ignited her determination to address the issue in her community. A chance meeting with then-additional collector B. Rohini Ramdas during a DRDA awareness program further fuelled her resolve. Selvi formed an all-woman team and armed with whistles, confronted people defecating in open fields, despite facing abuse and resistance. Her persistence paid off, and within months, the mindset of villagers began to shift. Selvi's grassroots efforts, rooted in her childhood passion for social work, led to the construction of over 5,000 toilets across 15 panchayats in Sakkimangalam and nearby villages like Narasingam and Tiruparankundram. She mobilized government aid, encouraged women to build twin-leach pit toilets, and collaborated with schools and doctors to promote sanitation. Her innovative methods, such as marking students' attendance based on toilet availability, brought remarkable results. Recognized with the Swachh Bharat Puraskar, Selvi now serves as the coordinator of the Solid Waste Management program, working closely with DRDA. Selvi's mantra of speaking plainly and empathetically has transformed Sakkimangalam into an Open Defecation Free (ODF) area, restoring dignity and privacy to countless women and girls. Her story is a testament to the power of community-driven change in achieving the Swachh Bharat Mission's goals. (Lalitha Ranjani 2019)

v. Strategic Planning and Multi-Stakeholder Approach – Salem, Tamil Nadu

Salem's journey to becoming Open Defecation Free (ODF) is a remarkable example of strategic planning and community engagement under the Swachh Bharat Mission Gramin (SBM-G). The district seamlessly integrated political support, community mobilization, and corporate collaboration to achieve its goals. On World Toilet Day (November 19, 2017), mass toilet construction was initiated in villages with the highest demand, supported by the establishment of production centers for construction materials. A unique initiative was the training of over 500 women from socially backward areas as masons, empowering them to build toilets and actively participate in the mission. Corporate involvement was also pivotal, with a CSR symposium mobilizing funds from major companies like Malco, JSW, and Chemplast Samar under the SBM Kosh. The district administration further encouraged toilet construction by releasing 1 lakh greeting cards appealing to residents to build toilets for a cleaner future. To foster community spirit, the Salem Super League Sports Meet (January 20, 2018) was organized for youth from ODF villages, creating healthy competition. During Republic Day week (January 26, 2018), a mass campaign titled "Freedom from OD" was launched, supported by 2 lakh stickers and 30,000 posters distributed across 5,109 habitations. To ensure sustainability, the district introduced color-coded monitoring and designed stickers emphasizing proper toilet usage. Salem's innovative and inclusive approach, combining grassroots efforts, corporate support, and creative awareness campaigns, serves as a model for other districts striving to achieve ODF status.

VII. Challenges in Effective Implementation of Swachh Bharat Mission

Despite the successes, Swachh Bharat Mission faced several challenges during its implementation:

i. **Behavioral Change**: Building toilets was relatively easier than convincing people to use them regularly. Long-standing cultural habits of open defecation were difficult to break.
ii. **Quality of Construction**: In several cases, the toilets constructed were of poor quality due to budget constraints, lack of technical expertise, and corruption in procurement processes.
iii. **Sustainability**: Even in ODF-declared villages, slippage occurred when toilets were not maintained, water supply was inadequate, or waste management was neglected.
iv. **Urban Waste Management**: Cities struggled to handle solid waste management, with insufficient infrastructure for segregation, recycling, and scientific disposal.
v. **Inequalities in Access**: Marginalized communities, landless households, and migrants faced difficulty in accessing sanitation facilities, especially in informal settlements.
vi. **Monitoring and Verification**: While SBM reported rapid progress, independent surveys often highlighted discrepancies between official claims and ground realities. Issues like ghost toilets (non-existent toilets shown in records) and inflated data were flagged in several audits.

VIII. Recommendations for Improving the Efficiency of Swachh Bharat Mission

i. **Strengthening Behavioral Change Initiatives:** Expand community-led awareness programs and integrate sanitation education into school curricula to ensure lasting adoption of hygienic practices.
ii. **Ensure Quality and Sustainability of Infrastructure:** Implement stricter quality control measures for toilet construction to avoid poor-quality infrastructure. Provide technical training to local masons and ensure regular maintenance of toilets through community-led monitoring committees.
iii. **Improving Waste Management Systems:** Strengthen solid and liquid waste management mechanisms in both rural and urban areas through better segregation, recycling, and disposal methods.
iv. **Ensuring Water Availability:** Address water scarcity issues by integrating SBM with water conservation programs to ensure toilets remain functional.
v. **Strengthening Monitoring and Transparency:** Implement independent audits, real-time tracking, and community feedback mechanisms to verify and sustain ODF status while preventing data inflation.
vi. **Promote Women and Youth Participation:** Empower women and youth to take leadership roles in sanitation initiatives. Encourage the formation of women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and youth clubs to drive behavioral change and ensure the sustainability of sanitation practices.

IX. Conclusion

The Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) has significantly transformed India's sanitation landscape, making substantial progress in eliminating open defecation and improving hygiene practices. By focusing on infrastructure development, behavioral change, and community participation, the mission has achieved remarkable results, including increased toilet coverage, reduced infant mortality rates, and enhanced waste management systems. The success of SBM has been globally recognized, inspiring sanitation programs in other countries. Despite these achievements, challenges remain in ensuring the long-term sustainability of sanitation improvements. Issues such as poor toilet maintenance, lack of water supply, and waste management inefficiencies threaten to reverse progress. Additionally, behavioral change, particularly in rural areas, requires continuous reinforcement through awareness campaigns and community-led initiatives. To enhance the effectiveness of SBM, future policies should emphasize quality infrastructure, reliable water supply, and inclusive approaches that reach marginalized populations. Strengthening monitoring mechanisms and ensuring transparency in reporting are also crucial for maintaining ODF status. Moreover, integrating SBM with other development programs, such as water conservation and rural employment schemes, can enhance its sustainability. Overall, the Swachh Bharat Mission has laid a strong foundation for improving sanitation in India, but continued efforts are necessary to sustain and expand its impact for future generations.

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