

# A Step in to the Toilet<sup>20</sup>

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## Challenge

The government and leaders were successful in creating a flourishing economy but fell short at places in uplifting the rural population in terms of sanitation and hygiene. Till 2014, half of our countrymen suffered from open defecation wherein millions had to sacrifice their dignity every morning to attend to the call of the nature. The problem was acute in villages where fields served the purpose and toilet was often traded in for scooter, bikes, or television. The sanitation and hygiene cost penalized not only the dignity of the women but the health of infants who fell prey to diarrhea and other diseases impacting their physical and cognitive growth and development. The poor health of children who are our future workforce could deter the growth rate of the country. If the infrastructure and the status of the country had to be firmed up among leading economies, there was an unprecedented need to change the behavior of 60 crore people and rid the nation of open defecation.

## Response

The grit and gumption of one man broke the silence in households, government schemes and political speeches on topics like toilet, excreta, pot, latrine, open defecation that were considered bad words and unpalatable for conversations. Since our independence, million were set aside by the government but none ever tackled the problem that plagued half of our population every day irrespective of their caste, creed, age, or religion. In 2014, Mr. Narendra Modi, the esteemed Prime Minister of India announced the Swachh Bharat program with a seemingly impossible aim of weeding out this problem throughout the length and breadth of the country.

The massive resource-intensive transformation of the nation required strong leadership along with incessant communication to bring everyone onboard. In consultation with the Finance Minister Arun Jaitley, the ambitious mission was granted a handsome budget of over \$20 billion to facilitate access to sanitation to each and every Indian.

An extensive communication campaign was launched right from the top of the government to the government officers at the lowest levels who were entrusted with the task of creating awareness about hygiene and sanitation. The prime minister spoke on the issue at length at all his public speeches, in his radio program 'Mann in Baat' that was relayed and replayed and also shared his views on various programmes in TV to ensure that his message is delivered to everyone. The role of the government officials including the district collectors was to inform people about the schemes that have been rolled out to help them construct toilets in their homes and villages. The village panchayat played an active role in sharing the information with fellow villagers. The walls and pillars on highways were painted with graphic messages that conveyed, 'Animals shit in open. Humans go to toilet.' The images also displayed how the open defecation results in excreta flowing into our water bodies and thereby directly infecting our drinking water. At times, the messages felt crude but the sophisticated crafting wouldn't have driven home the point.

The private matter in those days had become the most publicly debated issue. The successful construction of toilets in one village would inspire the neighboring village. This government initiative led by Modi snowballed into a national success story. Through newspapers and advertisements on television, toilets caught the fancy of entire nation. Even Bollywood was not insular to the impact of the initiative. A noted filmmaker Shree Narayan Singh beautifully narrated the story of entrenched mindsets in a village setting with Akshay Kumar, Bhumi Padnekar, Anupam Kher,

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13 Extract from 'How Swachh Bharat changed India and became a global inspiration, Sep 19, 2018, Economic Times'

Sudhir Pandey and Devyendu Sharma in the star cast. The portrayal of the travails of a young bride who complained about lack of proper toilet to the protagonist, her husband in Toilet: EkPrem Katha not only delivered the message to the masses but scored at the box-office by earning over 300 crores in revenue. Similarly, the vision of PM Modi scored among the rural masses with the remarkable improvement in rural India's sanitation coverage.

The rural India's sanitation cover registered a stupendous growth from 39% in 2014 to around 93% in 2018. Sanitation and toilets are no longer a taboo to be brushed under the carpet instead of talking openly about it. Altering the mindset was the biggest challenge in this journey but once achieved, it was also the biggest enabler in bringing others into the fold of this initiative. Toilets have been named as 'Izzatghar' (respect house) in few parts of the country as they restored the dignity of the people. As part of the campaign, till date 8.5 crore rural households including schedule castes, schedule tribes, women-headed households, and small and landless farmers have been offered a financial incentive of Rupees 12,000 each to build their own toilet. Due to the availability of toilets, over 50 crore people have shunned the practice of open defecation in the past four years.

The transformation of the vast rural landscape has yielded economic and social benefits which validate the beliefs and the rationale for investing so heavily in rural sanitation. The merits can be gauged with the World Health Organization's assessment predicting saving of over three lakh lives if India becomes ODF (open defecation free) by 2019. As per UNICEF's estimation in 2017, the ROI (return on investment) for sanitation is 400%. PM Modi won not only the hearts of the rural population but admiration of several global leaders. It can undoubtedly be touted as one of the largest and most successful experiments in public policy yielding health and economic returns by boosting productivity and safety of women and children. India is all set to share the recipe for success with 50 sanitation ministers from all over the globe at 2018 Mahatma Gandhi Sanitation Convention (MGISC).

## **Learning**

1. Building awareness through communication is important for enlisting the support of the people affected by change.
2. The mandate from the top should be effectively delivered to the people at the grass root level.
3. Large-scale transformation requires firm leadership and the necessary resources along with extensive communication.

## **Questions**

1. How did PM Modi embark on the large scale change of improving the Indian rural sanitation?
2. What were the various methods of delivering the message to the population?

## **Course Positioning**

The caselet is suitable for a course in Organization Development (OD) and Leadership. As the caselet deals with the social issue compounded with the entrenched regressive mindset, it will be helpful in introducing topics like Implementation conditions for failure and success in O.D efforts, and Nature of planned change.