

THE HINDU, Monday, July 14, 2003

## UN report hails Sulabh

By our staff reporter

New Delhi, July 13, the recently released Human Development Report, 2003, of the United Nations Development Programme has praised the work of Sulabh International – a non government Organisation – for what it asserts as the pioneering work in not only disposing human waste in a socially acceptable way, but also in an affordable manner.

The NGO, which runs more than 5,500 community toilets in the country including over a hundred in Delhi, has been applauded for its approach in dealing with human waste. The Human Development Report in its fourth chapter on “Public Policies to Improve People's Health Education” has given a separate box on Sulabh's achievement, probably the only Indian NGO which has been acknowledged by UNDP in the report.

Its approach is based on partnership with local government, backed by community participation and has substantially improved environmental quality in rural and urban slums by poor people, it said.

Referring to the large-scale open defecation here, the Human Development Report said Sulabh's solution was a low-cost, pour-flush water-seal toilet with leach pits for the on-site disposal of human waste.

“The technology too is affordable as the design of toilet complexes suits various income levels,” it said. Unlike the modern toilets which use 10 litres of water for flushing, the Sulabh's toilet require only two litres,” the report said.

It was probably for these reasons that recently

a delegation from Afghanistan came to the Capital to have deliberation with Sulabh's officials here so that they could establish 500 similar community toilets in Kabul. The NGO has agreed to help the Kabul administration in its endeavor. This week, a South African team had come to the Capital to seek technical support of Sulabh to streamline the sanitation system in their country.

The report said since 1970, when it was established, Sulabh has constructed more than 10 lakh such units in the country. On the 5,500 community toilet complexes being run by it, the report said, these included facilities for bathing and doing laundry and offer free services to children and disabled people. As a result, more than one crore people have received improved “and low-cost sanitation and has created as many as 50,000 jobs,” it said.

Appreciating the Sulabh's door-to-door campaign to provide free health education to lakhs of people, the report said the NGO also trains local people to construct more latrines themselves and has helped set up and maintain fee based community toilets in the slums and other areas.

The Human Development Report, 2003, observed that there was a pressing need to provide technologies that people want to use. The best way to do so is through products, which match consumers demand in both price and quality like the one offered by Sulabh, it said.

# Valmiki's children script a small epic of their own at this school

Outlook August 26, 2002

AFTER you wriggle your way through some of west Delhi's notoriously clogged dirt-roads on a rainy morning, past the "Radhey Krishna Fast Food" centres, past the never-ending squatter settlements, the ferns sprouting from a toilet bowl atop a beautifully-crafted iron gate come



as a surprise. The business of bathrooms is taken seriously at the Sulabh International Museum of Toilets, we are told. But this place isn't about intricately-carved and painted urinals or commodes, nor the bowls' role in history—"Toilets were the places where many conspiracies were hatched...Edward II was locked in his loo," says a message inside one toilet. On these premises, the dreams of around 350 children, now busy mugging up their Maths and English lessons from dog-eared textbooks, are taking shape.

Cliches ring so true for the Sulabh Public school. Indeed, it is a school with a difference— 60 per cent of the children here come from scavenger families. They know that beyond the "A for Apple and B for Boy" lessons, the four walls of the school hold the promise of multiplying their aspirations, dreams which

their parents saw but could never fulfil. They realise that society may have given them the more politically correct name of "Valmikis", but it does nothing or little at all to bring them into the mainstream. This is the vacuum the school fills—by giving them empowerment at the grassroots, or what social scientists call vertical mobility.

Founded in 1992 by Padma Bhushan Dr Bindeshwar Pathak, founder of the Sulabh International Social Service organisation, this is India's "first quality school for the children of Valmikis". "Smile, You're in Sulabh", is the driving force behind every day spent in the school for the last 10 years. The CBSE-recognised school currently has classes till Standard 9, and every year a new class is added. Everything, from textbooks, uniforms to transport, is free for the children, most of whom are first-generation learners.

Says Mrs Sheel Prasad, principal of the school, "These children have grown up in front of me, and we take pride in their achievements. Their parents know the value of what we are giving to their children because they themselves never went to any school." An air force officer's wife, Prasad says initially the school was just like any other teaching assignment. "But now it has grown on me. I remember the time when these kids used to sit on my lap. Today they have grown so tall that at times I have to ask them to bend before I pull their ears. There is a sense of personal satisfaction, which I don't think any other school or a post would have given me."



Her pride is not without reason. Already, the difference the school has made on these young lives is perceptible. Kavita, a class VII student, wants to emulate Magsaysay award-winner Kiran Bedi once she passes out of the school. Rajbir, another 12-year-old, dreams of making it into the Indian cricket team one day, and in between classes, is busy honing his batting skills. Interestingly, the school does not differentiate between the Valmiki children and others in the classroom. Says Prof S. Tripathi, honorary chairman of the Sulabh International Centre for Action Sociology: 'This school is about breaking down the rigid caste and cultural barriers of our society. There is never any question of differentiating between students. It is about internalising the values the child brings with him and mixing them with others for a larger whole.' But do the cultural and caste differences weigh on the mind of upper-caste parents? No, claims Prasad: "Never in the last 10 years have I faced a situation where parents have discouraged

their children from mingling or interacting with children of another caste. For them, getting their child educated in an environment where they don't have to face the same taunts or jeers they face in the society is more important. And this school treats everyone alike."

The school was recognised by the Directorate of Education, Delhi government, last year, and if all goes well, the first batch of class X students will pass out next year. Prasad is already impatient. Says she: "We have nurtured these children with care. We just play the catalysts' role." For more information,

The school treats everyone alike. And no parent has ever discouraged their children from mingling with those from another caste.

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India Today

August 19, 2002

SULABH SHAUCHALAYA

## Toilet Training

**E**MBARRASSINGLY for a country whose satellites ride homemade rockets into space, public sanitation is still largely a disaster story: only 1 per cent of the rural population has access to sanitary facilities: in urban areas it's 20 per cent. A significant move to redress the situation has been made by Sulabh International, an organisation that began working for an appropriate technology solution in Bihar, in 1970. A low-cost, eco-friendly alternative for rural areas, small towns and slums in large urban areas, the steep, sloping toilet bowl of the Sulabh Shauehalaya (Sulabh latrine) and its compost latrines cost about Rs 2,000 to construct. It uses a fifth of

the water used by cisterns to flush, doing away with the vastly ineffective septic tank system, the degrading use of human scavengers to clean excreta, and reducing the incidence of disease.

The Delhi-based organisation claims to have set up 7.5 lakh units in India, earning a commission for each toilet system sold—bought directly by communities or supported by government initiatives. It currently maintains 5,000 pay-per-use public toilet and bath complexes in India, mainly in towns and cities. VS. Naipaul. Who once wrote that India defecates in the open, would be pleased.



THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, PATNA, MONDAY DECEMBER 30, 1991

## Pathak's concern at global water crisis

PATNA, Dec 29- "A global water crisis is fast building up following the increased demand for this only mineral which is consumed raw. No wonder there is water contamination and consequent deaths from stomach-related diseases. Unsafe water and inadequate sanitation claim about five million lives of children between the ages four and five, most of them in the developing countries. Of this, one-third die in India alone," This Wiin stated by Dr Bindeshwar patkak whilst speaking at the Global Forum of the Collaborative Council meeting on water supply and sanitation held at Oslo, Norway in September last. Pathak, founder of Sulabh International, represented India's NGOs at the global meeting. His visit was funded by UNICEF. Dr Pathak said the Water Decade (1980-91) generated considerable interest in the water supply problems, but changed almost nothing. The gains had been negated by the rising population. In the Global context, during the last ten years, over 1.3 billion new users had been supplied with uncontaminated drinking water and 700 million with sanitary facilities, he added.

He said the current level of investment, for water supply and sanitation in developing countries, was estimated to be between eight and ten billion dollars a year. Of this, the external support agencies had been contributing some 30%, with the remainder being undertaken by the developing countries themselves. Using these figures as a guideline and assuming a contribution of present procedure to provide water supply and sanitation for all during the 19yOs, would require a five fold increase or as much as 50 billion US dollars a year.

Referring to the Indian situation Dr Pathak said high-money approach to water problem was alright but since there were not enough funds to be invested in this sector without affecting production plans, "it is better if we defer supplying piped water to villages and adopt installation of small bore hand-pumps of the sturdy type, known as India-Mark II or its im-r proved version in all places

where these are feasible." The alternative of piped water supply should be adopted only where boring a tubewell for hand-pumps'was not feasible, he said. Referring to sanitation in India, Dr Pathak said that only 45 per cent of the population in urban areas was provided with sanitation facilities and in rural areas, the coverage was as low as three per cent. About 700 million people in the country still defecated in the open and as many as 60 lakh dry privies was physically cleaned by about six lakh scavengers, who were condemned to miserable living.

He further said that many attempts had been made to liberate them from this inhuman and cruel practice, beginning from Gandhiji. But, still the problem remains unsolved. Open defecation caused many stomach-related diseases, many of which will fatal such 'as 'gastro-enteritis, typhoid and cholera. The victims were the poor. Besides everything else, such diseases lalso affected productivity and income. Wherefore, health of !he country's workforce is an important area of Investment for which the Government should allot high priority, now that it was taking determined steps to raise productivity and production, Dr Pathak said.

He opined that Sulabh technology was a major step in this direction as it was affordable, acceptable and could be made easily available to all, as well as scavenging free and therefore recommended for adoption in South Asia, Latin America and Africa by national and international agencies, including UNDP, World Bank, UN-1CEF, WHO and Central and State Governments of India.

All these and other related factors were discussed at the Oslo meeting, to which Dr Pathak was invited for making suggestions to ensure safe water and improved sanitation to people a new cause to which the collaborative council meeting was committed.

HT Correspondent

THE TRIBUNE, OCTOBER 5, 2001

## Sulabh launches cleanliness drive

TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

FARIDABAD, OCTOBER 4

After some initial hitches the Sulabh International, which has been awarded a contract in eastern parts of the town, has started functioning.

This was stated by a senior vice-president of the organization, Ms Sushmita Shekhar here yesterday. She said some vested interests were not happy with the decision of the municipal corporation to handover the work to Sulabh International. They had been trying to create problems but the organization was able to conduct its work smoothly and residents' various areas were happy with the cleanliness drive.

She said heaps of garbage lying for several months had been removed besides cleanliness on daily basis. The organization was given the contact on July 12 last by the municipal corporation on monthly payment of Rs 25 lakh for maintaining cleanliness in the 22 an stretch east of the Delhi Mathura road from Badar Pur border to Jarsatli village.

The Mayor, Deputy Mayor and various residents welfare associations had expressed

satisfaction over the work done by the organization so far.

Mrs. Anita Goswami, Mayor, said the situation had improved in many areas of the district. She said coordination between Sulabh and the municipal corporation was required to achieve better results.

The Deputy Mayor, Mrs Kanta Bathla, said complaints were mainly attended to by the Safai workers. Mr. Bhagwat Singh Nagar, Mr. Nand Kishore Singla, Mrs. Pratibha Yadav, Mrs Pravin Mehta, Mr B.S. Tewatia, and Mr Daya Chand Yadav (all corporators) have defended the work so far.

The Resident Welfare Associations of Sector 15-A, Sector-29, Sector-11 (DLF), Bhomiya Mandir Pocket Section – 16 (North-East), Sector-37 Sector-7A-E, Ward No-21 and Ballabgarh have also praised the work done by the organization. The Sulabh authorities have meanwhile decided to launch an awareness campaign on sanitation.



The Statesman, Saturday, 28<sup>th</sup> July, 2001

## LOO AND BEHOLD

Anurag Yadav

QUESTION: 'What's common between a loo and a grave-yard?'

Answer: Everyone has to go there sometime!

Morbid British jokes aside, the fact is the loo, over the ages, has reflected cultural mores, social prejudices and even reflected the development of society. Now a unique Museum near Delhi traces the history of the toilet as it evolved over the centuries.



Built by Sulabh International, the museum is the brain-child of Dr Bindeshwar Pathak, D.Litt from Patna who was moved by the plight of toilet cleaners in a village near his house. It spurred him to develop economical, easy to build and simple-to-maintain toilets.

The museum, according to its 'curator' Suresh Prasad, is an effort to raise awareness of clean and hygienic ways of human waste disposal. "We want each and every individual to understand the health, economic and social angles to developing clean toilet facilities".

A team of American researchers who visited the toilet museum recently was astonished at the unusual project. Built on a 3-acre plot on the Palam-Dabri village road near Delhi, it has a hall lined with pictures of ancient toilets that have become antique pieces today.

One such toilet is the throne of King Louis XIV.

In fact, the contraption worked both as a throne and a toilet pot which the emperor used for his official duties and personal needs at the same time. Another interesting item is a 'treasure chest'-shaped mobile toilet which the British took with them during hunting expeditions.

The museum has a rare collection of facts, pictures and objects detailing the historic evolution of toilets from 2500 BC to date. It gives a chronology of developments relating to technology, toilet related social customs, toilet etiquette as also the sanitary conditions and legislative efforts of the times. It has an extensive display of privies, chamber pots, toilet furniture, bidets and water closets in use from 1145 AD to modern times.

The pictures and objects displayed at the museum make one aware of how the world looked when societies did not have the benefit of water closets (WC) and the change that was brought by its invention.

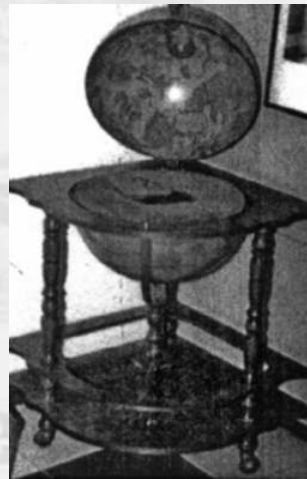
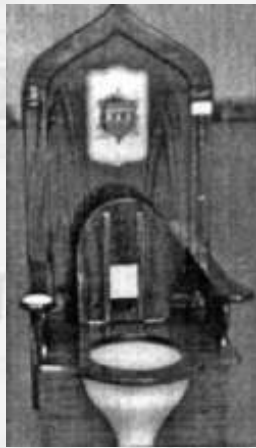
Ornately carved and painted urinals and commodes attract attention and are a source of amusement to many. There is a pictorial display of how the Roman emperors had toilet pots made of gold and silver.

The museum has a rare record of the flush pot devised in 1596 by John Harrington, a courier during Queen Elizabeth 1<sup>st</sup> reign.

There are also on display the highly evolved sewerage systems of the Mohenjodaro and Harrappan civilizations and a detailed record of how modern toilet pans have emerged over a period of time.

Tracing the history of toilets down the ages, the museum documents early technological developments in the evolution of toilets in Europe. The national flags of different





countries from where the pictures of toilets have been collected are displayed in front of the toilets.

While wisecracks abound the significance of the humble and much neglected pot can never be underestimated. The attempt to provide toilet facilities has a long history, possibly older than the Roman Empire. Excavations at Mohenjodaro yield proof of sophisticated common baths as well as private toilets in house-holds. Like in many other developments, after leading in sanitation facilities, the Indians fell way behind the developed world.

In ancient times, public baths reached the highest point of development. Under the Romans, in the second century BC, they became meeting places for people. Later in the Middle Ages, baths vanished except for some places in Spain. However, it was only after an outbreak of cholera in London in 1832 that the British authorities began a campaign for building public baths and 'wash houses'. In India, after 1940, public toilets were constructed in different towns but a majority of them have become unusable due to lack of good maintenance.

But it is not these ordinary lavatories and urinals that grab your attention. The cynosure of all eyes is the exquisite commodes. There is the picture of a medieval mobile commode in the shape of a treasure chest, which the English used while camping out for a hunt in India. You could imagine the surprise of some unsuspecting highway robbers if they made away with such is 'treasure chest' thinking it to contain money and valuables.

Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak says that he faced innumerable hurdles while setting up the museum. "When I would tell people about the project they laughed at me and thought I was playing some kind of a practical joke". Yet, undeterred he requested embassies and foreign institutions to help him get data about the history of loos. The US and UK embassies were the most forthcoming.

Full of interesting sidelights, the museum brings to focus this very important subject, which despite its humorous connotations, remains the most important calling in any person's life. If you are still not convinced, ask anyone who's had the pressing need to respond to natures' call when there is no toilet around!

## Rajnath dedicates Sulabh Kendra to temple township

Rajeev R Roy

Goverdhan (Mathura)

UTTAR PRADESH Chief Minister Rajnath Singh at a special function on Friday dedicated the Sulabh Suvidha Kendra to the people of Goverdhan. The town, which is about 20 kilometers away from... Mathura, is famous for the temple of Giriraj, an incarnation of Lord Krishna and the Goverdhan mountain.

Mythology has it that Lord Krishna-lifted the mountain on his finger tips and asked-the people of Mathura to take shelter under it to save themselves from the incessant rain. The Sulabh Suvidha Kendra (SSK), the first of its kind, was constructed by Sulabh International, a non-government organisation (NGO). Funded by Rajaya Sabha MP Dinanath Mishra, the Kendra will cater to the needs of thousands of devotees-of Lord Krishna, who visit the town every year. The total construction cost of the complex was estimated to be over Rs 70 lakh.

Appreciating the gesture of Mr Mishra and the promptness with, which Sulabh International built the Kendra, the Chief Minister said that his Government would do its best to ensure that there was not a single scavenger in the State. ; "We are in power not for the sake of power, but for serving the people and society.

We will look into the problems faced by this holy town," Mr Singh told the public gathering. Local MP Tej Vir Singh MLA Ajay Kumar and many others were present on the dais.

Earlier talking to *The Pioneer* Mr. Mishra said that Hindu holy shrines in the country are a neglected lot. "Thousands of people come on pilgrimage to Goverdhan every year. But there is no proper sanitation facility here," he said. "When I came to know that there was not even a single toilet complex in this holy place, I decided to get one built under the local area development scheme," Mr Mishra added,

A journalist-turned-politician, Mr Mishra said that he was also planning to get one Sulabh Suvidha Kendra constructed in Mathura. "I have donated Rs 2 crore to 42 institutes in Mathura to start computer education, I am also-funding a 'Vridha Ashram' in Mathura," Mr Mishra added.

"Sulabh Suvidha Kendra has all the facilities to cater to the needs of the pilgrims as well as the common people," Bindeshwar Pathak, the founder of Sulabh International said. One will have to pay Rs 2/- for using the urinal and toilet, and Rs 3/- for baths and taking rest.



THE TIMES OF INDIA

SATURDAY, APRIL 7, 2001

## Dubai to adopt Sulabh Technology

R.V. Smith

Sulabh International, the West Delhi-based organisation, which is the brainchild of Dr Bindeshwar Pathak, has won worldwide acclaim, but the Middle East emirate of Dubai has gone one step further. It has decided to adopt Sulabh sanitation technology.

After awarding the Dubai International Award for Best Practices to Improve the Living Environment to Sulabh sometime ago, Qassim Sultan, Director-General of Dubai Municipality, has now announced that "his country was planning to adopt the basic technology of the cost-effective sanitation system introduced by Sulabh International Social Service Organisation".

The Sulabh technology of "pour-flush" toilet "supercedes the technologies of sewage and septic tank system". The new technology recycles excreta to produce bio-gas that can be utilised for cooking and lighting purposes, while the sewage from the plant is used as fertiliser. Dubai's high rise buildings are all set to adopt the new technology, which has emanated from a cherished corner of West Delhi, thanks to the ingenuity and lifelong endeavor of Dr Pathak, a village boy who started from scratch to build up a sanitation empire. It would not be surprising if other members of the UAE (United Arab Emirates) follow Dubai's example and adopt the Sulabh system of sanitation.



THURSDAY, MARCH 8, 2001

YOUR NEIGHBOURHOOD NEWSPAPER FROM THE TIMES OF INDIA

## Sulabh's new venture

R.V.Smith

Sulabh International, the West Delhi organisation headed by Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak, has signed a contract with the Archaeological Survey of India to provide Suvridha Kendras (toilet facilities) at 34 World Heritage sites in India. The first such kendra was opened last week by Shabana Azmi at Safdurjung's Tomb. Anant Kumar, union minister for tourism and culture presided over the function. A beaming Dr. Pathak hoped the facilities would be a trendsetter.

According to Komal Anand, director-general of ASI, about 40,000 people visit the 34 heritage sites in the country every day and are hampered because of lack of sanitation facilities there. The Qutub Minar, Humayun's Tomb and the Red Fort will be among the sites covered. There is already a Sulabh toilet at the Taj Mahal. Sulabh will construct on a pay-and-use basis, a press release issued by the organisation said.

The agreement was signed on behalf of Sulabh by regional chief Keval Krishnan and by Komal Anand for the ASI. The Ishan Charitable Trust has provided the funds for the toilet block at Safdurjung's Tomb. According to the tourism minister, there are 3,606 centrally protected monuments in India. The Konark Sun Temple, the Ajanta and Ellora Caves and Nalanda will also be covered under the memorandum of understanding, which is expected to give a boost to Sulabh's activities. Incidentally, its toilet facilities were used by former USA President Bill Clinton and his delegation when they visited the Taj last year.

# LOOK FOR GOD YOURSELF

Dr Bindeshwar Pathak, Founder, Sulabh International

By Nilima Pathak

Life Positive, January 2001

In spirituality lies the essence of happiness," says Dr Bindeshwar Pathak, founder of Sulabh International Social Service Organization, considered one of the biggest NGOs in India and a pioneer in low-cost sanitation. In 1969 Dr Pathak was entrusted with a special job by a committee set up during the Gandhi centenary celebrations in Patna, India. The committee aimed to liberate scavengers. Fascinated by the idea, he read literature on public health and hygiene, including books on disposal of night soil in rural areas. The committee failed to make an impact. But Pathak did. He resigned from the committee and designed a flush toilet, which functioned without being connected to the sewerage system. This was the beginning of Sulabh Shauchalaya.

Dr Pathak has since been honored with the Padma Bhushan award, the International Saint Francis Prize for the Environment, the NRI Gold Award and the most recent Dubai International Award for Best Practices to Improve the Living Environment 2000.

Says he: "Life cannot be happy and fulfilling without spirituality. Whoever is spiritual will think differently from a non-spiritual person. And depending on the line of thought a person follows, the fruits are borne accordingly. It's God who decides life for us as we are mere pawns in his hands."

But he cautions: "It's important to note that spirituality and religion are two different things. And combining them can be disastrous." Citing an example, he states:

"(Lord) Rama exercised his powers with spirituality and bhakti (faith) and vanquished Ravana (epic character in the Ramayana). But Ravana, although an extremely religious person, combined his powers with ego and that was his undoing."

Born into an upper-caste family in Bihar, India, Dr Pathak makes a rueful observation: "The sad fact is that a newborn child is tied into three bonds—religion, caste and thought. And on growing up it's difficult for him to come out of any of these. But whoever does, is a great man. And in a sense becomes one with God."

He recalls an incident when he had gone to the Somnath temple and tears rolled down his cheeks for several minutes. "I had lost myself in God. And a similar incident occurred at home. One can't express these experiences in words."

Dr Pathak is a keen observer. "In life I have learnt a lot by what I read or from people I meet and interact with," he says. But no, he's never followed a guru. "We look for God in others but not in our own self. As for me, I do introspection and that's the main aim of being spiritual."

Although he watches television programs of Asaram Bapu and Dada Vaswani, Dr Pathak finds Osho very convincing. "I am impressed by his thoughts and sayings. For instance, he says, the body has mind, mind has intellect and in intellect is enlightenment (chaitanya). Toh jiski chetna jaag jaati hai, woh insaan hi



duniya ko dekh aur bhog sakta hai. Aur woh hi bhagwan ko prapt kar sakta hai (Only he who has been enlightened can realize life and God). How philosophical!" he comments.

As far as Sulabh is concerned, sanitation has been treated as dharma. "Dharma means "vishwas" (belief)," he opines. "Sanitation is our religion and human development is thought of as karma and spirituality. I believe that whatever we are doing in this birth will be paid for in the next. What we all are going through is of the past birth. In our organization we have a system of a morning prayer."

The best teaching, he feels, is to create sensitivity and sensibility in a person.

Dr Pathak is credited with introducing the idea of obtaining bio—gas from human excreta. Despite heavy odds he set up the first bio—gas plant in Patna, India, in 1982, after six years of research. Today, more than 60 bio-gas plants are operational in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and other states in India. "Lack of sanitation and hygiene is a national health hazard. And it should be tackled on a war footing. The subject of toilets is much more important than any other social challenge."

A quiet reformer, he believes "it's a misconception that business and ethics can't go together. Right from the inception if you

decide that you will not use unfair means, your business will flourish and whatever the hardships, you'll overcome them. But if the foundation is laid on dishonesty and distrust, no business can survive for long. But money certainly can't buy peace or happiness".

In his pursuits and ambitions, the crusader under went hardships but remained positive. "Whenever you feel something is not going in your favor, you feel unhappy. The first rule is to go back from where you began. You'll find you were better off. Go through your achievement list. You'll feel better and positive. Whoever sees that remains happy but if you try to go beyond your means, you'll feel melancholic. Moreover, trust in God minimizes sufferings. If burdens are left to Him, they are taken care of." Continues Dr Pathak: "Contentment is also a feeling. Who's unhappy on what front who knows? Difficulties after all are not just related to oneself. Your work and family are as much a part. It may not be your creation, but since it's related, it affects you. But don't let negative thoughts come in. And when they do, faith in spirituality helps. I can't say I'm an extremely happy person. But yes, I try to remain happy and content."

Life Positive, January 2001



## Freedom at midnight

We always complain about how dirty our towns are, but have you ever bothered to find out why? Or done anything about it? Someone did.



Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak

At the stroke of the midnight hour, on August 14, 1947, India awoke to freedom. Sorry, not quite everyone. A certain section of people were, and still are, enslaved in the sub-human task of scavenging, that is, manually cleaning and carrying human excreta.

What if it was you? Scavenging is hereditary and everybody born in the sub-caste of scavenger or *bhangji* is destined to take up this hateful practice. *Bhangis* are treated as outcasts and 'polluting' people — whatever that is! They are the poorest of poor in society. Yeh mera India: Out of 950 million people in India, 700 million either defecate in the open, or use dangerously filthy bucket- or dry-latrines, where they can be easily infected. Out of about 4,800 towns in India, only 300 have sewers, but not fully! The cost of building and maintaining sewer systems is very expensive in a densely populated country like India.

Dr Pathak to the rescue: In 1970, Dr Bindeshwar Pathak, a serious follower of Gandhiji, launched the Sulabh Sanitation Movement to destroy this cruel practice. He wanted to give back dignity to half a million scavengers and create environmental cleanliness.

Dr Pathak developed a low-cost system called the 'two-pit pour flush toilet' and named it Sulabh Shauchalaya. Excreta could now be cleaned without actually handling human waste, and it

*I may not be born again and if it happens, I will like to be born in a family of scavengers so that I may relieve them of inhuman, unhealthy and hateful practice of carrying headloads of night-soil*



Mahatma Gandhi

saved precious water too by using only 2 litres of water for flushing, instead of the 10-15 litres needed in the normal system. Sulabh became a huge success.

No more scavenging: About 37,000 scavengers have been freed from their inhuman task. 240 towns have been made scavenging-free, and about 8,00,000 Sulabh Shauchalayas have been constructed.

After setting up neat and clean toilet complexes and liberating scavengers, Sulabh has set up a number of vocational training institutes throughout the country where freed scavengers and their children can learn new skills to earn a different livelihood.

Sulabh has set up an English medium school in Delhi for children of the poor. "More than half the children are from scavenger families. We provide free education and make sure that there is no discrimination amongst them," explains Mrs Sheel Prasad, the principal. Thanks to Sulabh, these children have a bright future ahead of them. Kavita, a student of class VII was inspired by a visit from Ms Kiran Bedi and wants to become a police officer. Twelve-year old Rajbir wants to become a cricketer. No more of the shame and suffering that their ancestors had to face.

Wah Sulabh! Sulabh has persuaded a large number of important persons like judges, politicians, ministers, journalists and social workers to adopt one scavenger family each and

May 1999

help them to get jobs and other benefits, besides social recognition.

Soon, you may no longer have to screw up your nose or go green in the face every time you go to an Indian railway station. Sulabh operates and maintains about 100 Shauchalaya complexes at important railway stations. The Indian railways are so impressed by their efficiency and cost-effectiveness that they are seriously considering handing over to them the maintenance of lavatories and compartments in important trains, cleaning of platforms, and the running and maintenance of loos in waiting-rooms.

And, hold your breath. Now you can use your very own poo as fuel. Sulabh has converted human excreta into biogas! Sulabh biogas is being used to cook food, heat water and light street lamps.

#### A museum of toilets

We, at Gobar Times, were amused and curious when we first heard of the Sulabh Museum of Toilets in Delhi. We went to take a leak...er...look. Housed in two rooms in the Sulabh International complex, this quaint museum is a treasure house of fascinating facts, and has an assorted collection of everything to do with toilets through the ages.

Did you know that the Manusmriti Vishnupuran, an ancient Sanskrit text written around 1500 B.C. has *shlokas* on toilet manners — right down to how far away from drinking water sources you should 'do it'! Or that the largest public toilet ever built is by Sulabh, at Shirdi Sai Baba's complex?

As far back as 431 BC, in Athens, Greece, there were scavengers whose work it was to dump all the waste at the outskirts. In medieval Germany, people used to throw their shit on passers-by on the street below 'just for fun'. Yucky Holi! And in case you were wondering why the toilet seat is called the throne, you can take a look at the model of Louis XIII's toilet.. Shaped like a throne, the monarch sat on it while presiding over his court. Talk about a hardworking king!

"Started in 1994, the museum's aim is to get people interested in issues of sanitation", says R K Sinha, the curator, "No better way of doing this than by amusing them". Over the years, the

museum has collected every possible trivia related to toilets from around the world.

What better way for the French to express their hatred for the English than to make a toilet designed as a collection of huge books, with titles by — *Shakespeare*, of course! Are you always travelling? The portable potty is for you, complete with toilet paper and soap. Or what about the ultimate high-tech microwave potty. All your gunk gets incinerated to a spoonful of ash in an instant! No smell, no pollution. Unfortunately, its a very expensive way of getting rid of our waste.

Do you suffer from constipation or diarrhoea? Take help from the *Sujok* therapy of Dr. Sir Park of Korea, by taking a pencil or blunt object and tracing it along the palm of your hand — clockwise to ease the pressure, or anti-clockwise to turn it on, depending on your condition. As the Kobe Appeal of the Kobe International Toilet Symposium in 1993 says that its high time we did not treat the subject as a taboo, and brought about a 'toilet culture' for a healthier environment.



About half a million scavengers or bhangis, the most poor and exploited people of india, still clean dry toilets with their bare hands



THE HINDUSTAN TIMES  
NEW DELHI SATURDAY SEPTEMBER 6, 1997

## With Malice Towards One And All....

Bhangi Raja

As significant as the near unanimous election of a Scheduled Caste man as the Rashtrapati was the All India Scheduled Caste Federation convention at Amritsar honouring Bindeshwar Pathak, a Brahmin, with the Ambedkar Award of Rs. 1 lakh for distinguished service to *bhangis* (sweepers and earners of nightsoil). If you don't know, Pathak is the founder of Sulabh which has designed and built thousands of latrines which use a minimum of water.

Without doubt the scene which nauseates foreign visitors travelling by rail is the sight of bare bottoms defecating along the tracks. As a matter of fact 90 per cent of our population still defecate in the open, making India the largest defecation ground in the world. It is tolerable in the open countryside where human shit turns into organic manure. But in towns and villages it only creates stench and is a serious, health hazard. Innumerable water and fly-borne diseases come from human waste. More important than the song and dance bonanza over the Golden Jubilee of our Independence was to provide toilet facilities to our people. Can you believe that the vast majority of our government schools (estimated at 7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> lakhs) have no lavatories! And of our nearly 5,000 towns only 230 have sewage systems! What is most shameful is that in the estimated 7.5 million homes that have lavatories, their cleaning is done manually by bhangis - our own brethren.

Pathak set up Sulabh 25 years ago without any financial assistance from the Government or any other national or international agency. It has constructed over one million *shauchalayas* (toilets) across the length and breadth of the country. They generate their own income in the form of a very nominal charge for using them. It is a great day for India when an obscure Bihari Brahmin becomes Rashtrapati of the *bhangis* of India.

KHUSHWANT SINGH

## CAPTAIN OF INDUSTRY

Over two decades ago, one man in India sought to give new life to a whole section of people which had been condemned to become the dregs of society. What Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak has achieved today is proof that sometimes, lofty ideals do have a place in this world.

# AGAINST THE ODDS

By NIRMALA MENON

It started out as a mission to give dignity to a hitherto neglected set of people. From those modest ambitions has grown an international organisation. But despite the growth, the underlying principles which govern Sulabh International remain the same. And the man who heads it continues to be true to his ideals.

Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak, at 53, still dresses simply, in traditional Indian outfit. The picture may be a little at odds with the cellular telephone he carries. But the man himself seems to be a spillover from the Gandhian era, which embraced simplicity as the cornerstone of life.

The war he was waged over the years in India pits him against a formidable adversary - the caste system.

Efforts to eradicate it has met with mixed success, although the momentum might pick up with increased economic success. "It (the caste system) is breaking up. But it will take time because it's 4,000 years old," says Pathak. What is heartening, he adds, is that the rigidity associated with it in the past does not exist today.

Pathak started Sulabh in 1970. It began, he says, with just one agenda - to restore human rights and dignity to those who carried human excreta for their livelihood.

The use of the word 'restore' is misleading, however. The complex caste system which is

entrenched in the psyche of the Hindu majority population determines everything from whom a person marries to the work he is destined to do.

It decrees that a person's profession is hereditary.

So, the best jobs are the province of the upper castes. Even the lowest caste would not deign to carry out those jobs which are perceived as dirty and degrading, such as carrying night soil. That lot falls on the hapless shoulders of the casteless - those who, through an accident of birth, were born outside the caste system. Mahatma Gandhi referred to them as Harijans - children of God. Unfortunately, however, that does not remove the stigma of their birth, at least among the orthodox Indians.

According to Pathak, due to mythological sanctions, those ordained by dint of their birth to carry night soil did their tasks in the most, primitive manner. They collected excreta by hand, put it into pails which they then carried on their heads. "The worst kind of atrocity committed against any section of traditional Indian society," is how. Pathak describes it. For their pains, they were treated as the "lowest of the low."

It was worse in the past, when they wore a ring around their necks, the sound of which indicated their presence in the vicinity - and allowed people to avoid them. Others carried sticks which they would beat on the ground to



warn people that they were around. Added to all these indignities was also the fact that they were collectively referred to by the derogatory term of scavenger.

The rings and sticks may "not exist today, but it is disturbing that the scavenger label

Continues to endure, even in Sulabh, a fact readily acknowledged by Pathak.

Today, there are some six million scavengers in India, compared to two million in 1931. Of this, about one million continue to practice their destined 'profession'.

#### Background

In today's materialistic, sycophantic world, it's easy to cynically dismiss Pathak as just another do-gooder. That would be a mistake. His work has to be seen in the context of his background and upbringing. The one factor which stands out is that he is a Brahmin, the highest caste in India. That makes him very much of a minority in the battle he wages to bring dignity to a much-abused section of society. This, despite what he says about rigidities giving way in the modern world.

The seeds for his continuing crusade were sown early in life, with two important but diverse factors contributing to shaping his eventual outlook. One was his maternal grandfather, a freedom fighter who worked among the casteless.

His paternal grandfather, however, was a different breed. An orthodox Brahmin who did not believe in crossing boundaries. This was reflected in their family practices. For instance, whenever a casteless person came to the door, his grandmother would sprinkle water around the place to 'remove impurities'. "That used to make me feel bad," says Pathak. Touching a casteless person was strictly taboo.

The curious Pathak broke the taboo often when he was unobserved. "I wanted to see whether, anything changed if I touched a

*horijan*," he says simply. But he was caught at it by his grandmother, who then made him swallow a mixture of sand, water from the holy river Ganges and cow dung 'to purify him.' He remembers crying, but there was no escape because he was forcibly held down and the mixture shoved into his mouth. This, over the protests of his mother who begged his Grandmother not to do so.

He was just 10 at the time. And the incident remains etched vividly in his mind. But although it helped to shape his eventual life, it had little to do with him eventually starting Sulabh. "Actually, I wanted to become a university lecturer," he says. However, that was not the path he was destined to take.

Although he obtained good marks' in his examinations, it did not gain him the first class honours he needed to go further in his ambition. Looking back, he feels that was the turning point of his life. "Had I got a first class, I would now be a Professor of Sociology at the university," he says. In all likelihood, Sulabh would also not have come into existence.

Despite his obvious empathy for the down-trodden, it would be some time yet before he was driven to actually do something about it.

In the meantime, he took up a series of jobs. He did teach for a while, in a school, after obtaining a degree in Sociology. But he gave it up in the late '60s to join the Electricity Board as a daily worker, at the then princely sum of Rs. 5 (Rs. 100=RM 7.70) a day.

That too was not satisfying. And it was about this time that, he started thinking about doing something beneficial for society. But he did not as yet know what to do.

He then left the Electricity Board to join his father, a doctor, to help sell the medicines which the elder Pathak also manufactured. He stayed for a year, and then left to continue his studies in criminology, which he had specialised in, in sociology.

## Turning Point

It was while he was on the way to the state of Madhya Pradesh for admission into the Masters of Sociology programme that fate stepped in to determine his path in life. He got off the train to have a cup of tea when he bumped into his uncle and a friend. They advised him to take on a job at the Gandhi Centenary Committee which had been set up to commemorate the birth of Mahatma Gandhi.

To ensure that he took their advice, they forcibly took his luggage off the train! With the decision taken out of his hands, he broke his journey and joined the Committee, working for four months without a salary. Thereafter, he was taken on as a paid worker, at Rs. 200 a month.

There again, destiny played its unseen hand. The Committee's first project was one which had been close to Mahatma Gandhi's heart - to relieve scavengers from their sub-human occupation. Pathak was entrusted with this task, which was to eventually lay the foundation for what was to be his life's work.

The main problem he faced was that there was no system to replace the task of the scavengers. So, despite having no technical background, he took upon himself, the task of looking for a solution. He developed a pour flush type of toilet that was safe and hygienic, which was based on the anaerobic digestion of human excreta, unlike conventional aerobic-based systems. The water requirement was also minimal; a scant two litres from pan to tank, compared to the two gallons needed in conventional systems. This gave rise to the *Sulabh Shauchahya* system; the words literally means easy or convenient in Hindi.

At that time too, the Centenary Committee was about to be dissolved, which meant that Pathak's work was about to end. However, the Bihar State Government was keen for the programme to be continued, so he was asked to resign from the Committee and set up an

organisation dedicated to promote the use of the new system. Thus was born the non-government organisation (NGO), *Sulabh Shauchalaya Sansthan*, in 1974. It has since been renamed Sulabh International.

Despite the literal meaning of Sulabh, for those within the organisation it has taken on a broader definition. According to Pathak, "the word is constructed, to mean the way to solve the problems of society "In Sulabh we're always trying to find solutions," he says.

## Academic Achievements

Setting up the organisation, however, did not diminish his interest in continuing with his interrupted education. In 1977, Pathak joined the University of Bihar to complete his Masters degree in Sociology. Juggling work and study was not easy, but he managed to complete the classes "with difficulty". In 1980, he finally obtained this degree.

That was not the end of his dalliance with academia. The following year, he commenced research for his Ph.D., which he gained in 1985. It was a year for dual honours for, he also obtained his second Masters degree, this time in English.

He then went on to complete his Doctorate in Literature in 1992. The subject of his thesis, which he developed himself, was familiar ground: Liberation of scavengers through low-cost sanitation in Bihar. Hardly a conventional topic. "It was only allowed after a long argument with the university authorities," admits Pathak.

All this time, he continued to be in the thick of the action at Sulabh, -which had also grown from its humble beginning. Initially, Pathak's idea had been to provide toilet and bathing facilities in Sulabh complexes, which are today found throughout India. Later, he began to think about: other services which the complexes could provide, such as health and education.



On a recent visit to India, this writer had the opportunity to visit a Sulabh complex, about 45 minutes outside New Delhi, and came away impressed.

In the compound, neat rows of young children were assembled in an orderly manner before proceeding to their respective classes. In the school rooms, meanwhile, other classes were already in progress. We were greeted politely and students proudly showed off their accomplishments in reading and writing.

Sulabh runs classes for children from the first to the third standard (five to seven years old). Says Pathak, each year, an additional class is added so that, eventually, they will become a comprehensive school.

In addition, older children are trained in various vocations, such as hairdressing, fashion designing and dress-making, and typewriting. During our visit, in one room which had been converted into a "beauty salon" a young girl was shaping the eye-brows of a 'customer' using a process known as threading. In a corner, another girl was drawing elaborate patterns on a client's hands using heena, an almost mandatory ritual for a bride.

Computer classes were being conducted in another room, while elsewhere, a group of young boys were trained to repair electrical appliances.

When these students have completed their courses, Sulabh also helps to find suitable jobs for them.

We trooped into a class where a group of engaging five years olds, with cheeky grins on their faces, stood up to recite nursery rhymes. It was then that the sum total of Pathak's accomplishments struck home. If not for him and his dedicated and talented team at Sulabh, these children would, in all likelihood, be condemned to the life which had been forced on their parents and fore

fathers.

Currently, some 280 children attend classes at this particular Sulabh complex, 60% of whom are from the scavenger community. The latter group is taken in free of cost, while others pay Rs. 75 a month. Elsewhere in the complex, teams of people were working on the design of toilets, as well as exploring likely spin-offs. Among these are the conversion of decomposed excreta into fertiliser, as well as the extraction of biogas which can be used for cooking and lighting. Pathak proudly shows us into a small kitchen where a cook is busy preparing lunch over a stove which runs on biogas from decomposed excreta.

All varieties of plants also flourish on the complex grounds, nourished by fertiliser from the decomposition pits.

The Sulabh complex also houses a number of spotless toilet and shower compartments. For a token sum, residents in the nearby town use the cubicles for their daily ablution. A laundry service was also started recently.

Apart from this, there is a small medical unit manned by an amiable doctor and his assistants which provides much-needed medical assistance to the town folk.

#### Self-sufficient

Despite the enormity of Sulabh's task, it does not receive a single cent from the Government. The Rs.24 lakhs, or Rs. 2.4 million, it requires annually is generated from the implementation of its toilet systems. To date, says Pathak, Sulabh has installed some one million of its toilets in India. According to him, the UNDP, WHO and Unicef have also promoted the use of these toilets in Southeast Asia and in some developed countries as well.

The remarkable degree of self-sufficiency achieved at Sulabh-is something Pathak seems particularly proud of. "We have shown that an NGO can work in close cooperation with the Government and can be self-reliant. And

this can be replicated. Any NGO generates funds from their activities and uses it for the poor. It is not necessary that they (NGO) should remain dependent on the Government," he says.

Buoyed with Sulabh's success in the urban areas, Pathak says the organisation now intends to go into integrated rural development. Towards this end, youths are now being trained in various vocations so that eventually, they can take the Sulabh system right into the rural areas. This is by no means a fast process. By Pathak's estimation, it will take at least 10 years before Sulabh reaches all the villages. On a perhaps more whimsical level, Pathak has set up a unique Museum of Toilets in Sulabh's Delhi complex, the only such place in India. Here, various types of toilets throughout the ages are displayed, ranging from the truly elaborate to the strictly functional. On the walls are displayed memorable and sometimes bawdy poetry to bodily functions and toilets!

#### Stepping Back

On a more personal level, Pathak feels it is time he begins to distance himself from the organisation which he has nurtured for more than two decades. He would prefer to act as an advisor and guide in the running of Sulabh so

that it will function even when he is no more. "Otherwise, how will it continue?" he asks practically.

He had already taken steps in that direction. Although he is at Sulabh all day, he leaves its running in the capable hand of his staff and devotes his time to writing books and attending seminars, as well as training. He also stresses on the importance of training the right sort of people to run an organisation like Sulabh.

For his efforts, Pathak has been the recipient of various awards and titles, among them the prestigious Padma Bhushan (India's third highest award) which was conferred on him in 1991 for distinguished social service.

The following year, he received the International St. Francis Prize for the Environment from the Vatican, which was preceded by an audience with Pope John Paul II.

The recognition has helped focus world attention on Sulabh, which often plays host to foreign delegations on study tours. But that does not mean that Pathak's battle is won. For him and his team, fighting for the dignity of a neglected group of people remains an ongoing war.



THE ASIAN AGE, 9 FEBRUARY 1996 – 3

## Unique school for scavenger's children

By Sirshendu Panth

New Delhi, Feb. 8: Vimla Devi earns her living by carrying night-soil on her head. Though she is a scavenger, her two sons study in an English-medium School.

It may sound fanciful, but it is true.

About 10 km. from the Indira Gandhi International Airport on the outskirts of Delhi, the Sulabh Public School has on its rolls 193 boys and girls coming from scavenger families.

The students are not only exempted from paying any fees, they are also provided two pairs of uniform, books, transport, midday refreshments and other facilities - all free of cost.

"This is the first quality school for educational development and social integration of sons and daughters of scavengers", says Sulabh International, the non-governmental organisation which runs the school.

The school aims to remove educational disparity between the haves and have-nots by making modern science-based education accessible to children of scavengers, says Mr. Verma.

The medium of instruction is English, but Sanskrit and Hindi are included in the school curriculum. Says Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak, the founder of the school, "Excellence in education cannot be achieved without English."

He argues that English provides access to vast reservoirs of scientific and technical knowledge which doubles every few years. "Earlier, the doubling period was 700 years or more," he adds.

Students also get to learn French. "Knowledge of a foreign language enhances one's value in the job market. The market is rather competitive nowadays," says Mr. Verma.

Started five years ago, the school at present

has classes upto the third standard, with one senior class being added every year.

Sulabh plans to start computer and typing classes from standard four to help students equip themselves with the requisite skills to compete in the job market.

Students are also periodically taken to villages to familiarise them with the rural milieu so that they do not get isolated from the mainstream.

"It is an excellent experiment I don't find any difference between them and the other children. They too have the same kind of potential which the higher caste students possess," says a teacher.

But the initial days were not so easy. Coming from families where standards of hygiene were seldom maintained, the teachers had a hard time inculcating clean habits among the children. "We had to cut their nails and shampoo their hair and sometimes even bathe them," says Sheel Prasad, the principal.

Often, the teachers had to resort to tough measures, even to the point of turning them out to make them adhere to rules of hygiene.

The success of their efforts is now reflected in the neat and smart bearing of the children. But other problems still remain.

With nobody to guide them at home, the students often tend to forget whatever is taught to them when they come to school after a vacation.

"We have to keep hammering the same points so that they can grasp them fully in the classroom itself," says Ms. Prasad.

Originally conceived as an exclusive school for children from scavenger families, the Sulabh Public School now admits 40 per cent of its students from non-scavenger backgrounds.

THE PIONEER ON SUNDAY

C.I.T.Y

August 20, 1995

## Scavenging worst violation of human rights: Patil

UNI - New Delhi

Lok Sabha Speaker Shivraj Patil on Saturday made a fervent plea to end the practice of scavenging which he described as the "worst violation of human rights."

Addressing the gathering on the occasion of the presentation of the Rajiv Gandhi Memorial Sulabh Sanitation Award to the Calcutta-based All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health, Mr. Patil "said, 'Society should come forward to spread awareness and end this practice once and for all.'"

He said the issue should not be tackled by the Government alone and it was society which could bring about a transformation. He complimented Sulabh International for its pioneering work in liberating scavengers but said a lot still needed to be done.

The Lok Sabha Speaker called for the use of appropriate and advanced technology for waste disposal which should be cost effective and economical at all levels and places.

Describing the late Rajiv Gandhi as a "great son of India," Mr. Patil said he appeared on the political horizon of the country at a critical moment of our history and influenced the political, social and culture milieu with his dynamic leadership and missionary zeal.

The Lok Sabha Speaker gave away the first Rajiv Gandhi Memorial Sulabh Sanitation Award to the 63-year-old institute which was received by the director of the Institute Dr. K.J. Nath.

The award carries a cash prize of Rs. 2 lakh and a gold plaque embossed with the late Rajiv Gandhi's image.

In his welcome address, Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak, founder of Sulabh International and renowned environmentalist, said the award had been named after late Rajiv Gandhi for his contribution in promoting sanitation, preventing

environmental pollution and abolishing scavenging in the country."

Dr. Pathak said, 'Scavenging is not only a problem of keeping places clean; it also involves great human sufferings and indignity, the abolition of which alone can soothe the conscience of the nation.' Rajiv Gandhi took major steps to eliminate this inhuman and cruel, practice and gave a new life to scavengers who are the most disadvantaged people in society, he said.

Mr. Shivraj Patil also released a commemorative volume of extracts from the speeches of Rajiv Gandhi compiled by Ms. Kamna Prasad. The foreword, to the book has been written by Mr. Mani Shanker Aiyar. The cover of the book has been illustrated by noted painter M.F. Hussain. Meanwhile a book written by Adish C. Aggarwala, standing counsel of the Union Government in Delhi High Court entitled Rajiv Gandhi An Assessment will be presented to President Shankar Dayal Sharma at a special function on Sunday. The foreword for the book has been written by the Vice-President K.R. Narayanan.

Students of the Sulabh Public School presented a colourful function on the occasion. Chairman of the National Human Rights Commission Ranganath Mishra in his presidential address said, "The problem of scavenging has a human rights factor which we have been trying to highlight." He said scavenging is a social scar that "we have allowed to continue."

Describing Sulabh's efforts as encouraging, the NHRC, chairman said Bihar where the movement took shape will be able to provide a presentable guidance to the country and humanity at large'. He said the nation needs a mental flush and expressed the hope that some one will emerge one day to provide that.



## UP, UP WITH PEOPLE

JANUARY 8, 1995

RAVI RANJAN SINHA visits the Sulabh Public School in the Capital. He takes his cue from the positive steps that have emerged from this model school and its training programme for the uplift of scavengers.

THEY HAD been pitied, endured, occasionally embraced. But they have waited for centuries to be accepted to be given opportunities to prove that they are capable of doing what others do. Not just cleaning toilets or, worse still, carrying or carting human excreta.

At the Sulabh International's Palam Complex, about 10 km away from the Indira Gandhi International Airport, New Delhi, a unique model is being worked out for the social upgradation of scavengers and their families which, if adopted by others, will help the community become socially acceptable to most people.

Sulabh International, after popularizing the low cost, pourflush, water-seal sanitary compost latrines, has taken some determined steps towards the social transformation of the most deprived socio-economic group, the scavengers.

The sprawling Palam Complex has Sulabh toilets of different types, a museum of toilets tracing their historical evolution from 2500 BC to 1980 AD, biogas plants run on energy obtained from human waste, laboratories conducting research specially to eliminate pathogen from manure made from night soil. But more important are the English-medium public school and vocational training centres for the children of scavengers, the first of their kind in India, to enable them to overcome impediments in their social climb upwards.

At the Sulabh public school, children of scavengers are given free modern and quality education in English. "Besides social mixing", school and training institutes, "this also gives

them the confidence to compete with others."

The school is already calling attention to itself because of its use of latest education aids, close attention from teachers, and its friendly environment for both study and play. At the school, children learn subjects like English, science and mathematics. They also learn Hindi and Sanskrit.

But why Sanskrit? Answers Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak, the founder of the Sulabh International "Not as a part of the three-language formula, but because the language has been the chief instrument in the hands of Brahmins, which they had been using to dominate society. Knowledge of Sanskrit will open the doors of a treasure trove of our heritage for these boys and girls, and they would know for themselves what wrong or right with what they have been told about our social system."

The public school at the Palam Complex, started about three years ago, has 225 students from lower kindergarten to class II some classes have more than one section with seven teachers, including one for music, and a physical training instructor. In all classes, says Mrs. Sheel Prasad, the principal of the school, the students are a mixed group, with the children of scavengers and others generally being mixed in the ratio of 60 to 40.

The wife of an Indian Air Force Officer, Sheel had spent a part of her childhood in the USA, where her parents then lived and was later educated at Chandigarh, where she obtained MA and M.Ed degrees. She has been with the school since its inception and finds working in "such an

Education at the school is not only free, but its pupils also get free uniforms, books and stationary, besides midday tiffin and free transport. Apart from these the school

arranges a periodic free medical check-up.

At the training centre at the Palam Complex, boys and girls learn skills that can help them to take up a job in the organised sector or prepare them for self-employment. Ms. Kanwaljit Kaur, the tailoring instructor, now busy with the third batch, states that most of the girls passing out of the institute (which is recognized by the Directorate of Technical Education and Training Delhi Administration) prefer to be on their own.

They receive a stipend of Rs. 500 per month for a year, which helps them to set up independent establishments. Some of these girls have trained other members of their families, who help them to fend for themselves.

While only girls have signed up for the tailoring classes, the electrician's trade has crossed the gender barrier. Both boys and girls have sought to acquire the skills for domestic wiring, in addition to the maintenance of household gadgets and appliances.

Their training programme has been designed to "integrate with the market requirement straightaway." Special syllabi, in consultation with the Delhi Administration's Directorate of Training and Technical Education, have been prepared to take into account "the present need and the future role they will play as professionals," says Mr. R.N. Verma.

While selecting trainees, the aptitude as well as the educational standard and mental level of the wards of scavengers are taken into consideration. For boys, who are often school dropouts from Class V to Class VII, special coaching - both in Hindi and English - are organized. After training, they work independently or with construction contractors.

Similarly, those trained to drive automobiles have secured jobs with commercial establishments, government departments, or with individuals. The Palam Complex has a computer centre, where boys and girls who do well at shorthand and typing are trained to

operate computers.

Separate classes impart both vocal and instrumental music, as part of the effort "to promote the all-round personality of boys and girls." Indeed, they have ample talent for music and dance, in evidence as they prepare to participate in the 1995 Republic Day parade along with elite schools from the Capital.

Working under the watchful eyes of Mr. Mohan Upreti, the noted theatre person who is on the faculty of the National School of Drama, the 134 boys and girls have responded well to the choreography by Mr. Sonal Manchandjee, though none have had any formal dance training.

Guardians and families of these students and trainees are overwhelmed at the way their wards have been shaping. Tarachand, who was a safai karamchari with the CSIR, has two daughters and a son attending the Sulabh Public School. He says, "I have myself started learning in their company." And adds proudly, "As I picked up reading and writing, I was promoted to the post of office peon." A middle-aged lady joined Sulabh's literacy classes at the complex when her son, at the Sulabh School, sought her help with his homework. Prabhati Lal, an octogenarian, has two grandsons and two granddaughters at the schools. A former Delhi Municipal Corporation employee, whose five sons had some education - one of them went up to the 10+2 level, while another passed the matriculation, and still regularly visits the schools and meets the principal. He feels that members of the Scheduled Tribes have not been able to benefit from the constitutional provisions for them due to lack of education.

Bahadur Singh from Ekbalpur village in Haryana, who works as a mazdoor or unskilled labourer, has put his two nephews in the school. With his income, he feels he could not afford such an education for his wards. Jile Singh, a DTC employee who took the matriculation examination from a government school, says he has put his two sons in the Sulabh School because of "superior teaching



and facilities," compared to government schools. Raj Kumar says he gets a "feedback" from the school, and his wards no longer skip classes, as they used to in a government school.

Apart from the public school and the vocational training centre, Sulabh International has launched a mass campaign aimed at the social upgradation of scavengers. This scheme envisages the adoption of one scavenger family each by a distinguished person. Ideally, the "parent family" has to visit the scavenger family, invite them to social gatherings and help them to avail of facilities guaranteed by the Constitution, such as reservation, education, employment, bank loans and preferences they are entitled to in other fields. Those who have joined the scheme, include public men like Mr. I.K. Gujral, Mr. Salman Khursheed, Mr. Mani Shankar Aiyer, Mr. Shiv Charan Mathur. Mrs. Margaret Alva, Mr. Dileep Padgaonkar, Justice Krishna Iyer, Mr. K.K.Venugopal, Mr. Lalit Bhasin, Justice V.M. Tarunde, Marshal K.D. Chadda and Air Commodore A. Saigal. This was introduced two years ago.

But all this – a public school, a vocational training centre or the adoption scheme – can at best be a model for a voluntary or non-government organisation (NGO) to follow, according to Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak, founder of the Sulabh International. The enormity of the problem rules out its solution through government effort.

India still has the largest number of scavengers – about six lakh – and they serve nearly five crore persons using dry latrines. Out of about 4,600 urban settlements in the country, not more than 230 have a sewerage system and only about a third of urban

households have provisions for a water-borne waste disposal system while another one-third have bucket privies and the remaining houses have no latrines at all.

The two laws passed by the Parliament in 1993, the Employment of Manual Scavengers and construction of Manual Scavenging and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition Act) and the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis Act are, according to Dr. Pathak, just half-measures as too much has been left to the discretion of state governments, which have neither the resources nor the wherewithal to have all latrines converted into water seal lavatories or to rehabilitate scavenger families.

Dr. Pathak feels that at least one centre, like that at Sulabh's Palam Complex, could go long way to create conditions to socially upgrade scavenger families. He says he is trying to contact 500 industrialists, including non-resident Indians to come forward and set up such centres. For his part he plans to move south first, to establish a complex similar to the Palam one near Bangalore a venture for which he is already in touch with the Karnataka government.

If the problem is so complex and enormous how does Dr. Pathak or the Sulabh International expect centres like the Palam Complex to achieve much?

Dr. Pathak does not say so many words but he seems to suggest that, as an action sociologist, he has to be resolute in the effort to activate things, with absolute faith in the saying that "the reward of a thing well done is to have done it."

Of course, he is sanguine that others will soon join in.

12 THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI. MONDAY SEPTEMBER 19 1994

## A compassionate crusader

Dr Bindeshwar Pathak has ushered in not just a revolution in community hygiene, but is also attempting a revolution of the mind, writes Guriqbal Singh



"A holy man? An idealist? A scientist? A capable businessman? Who, in reality, is Prof. Pathak: Perhaps a bit of all these, but, above all, we had the impression of a man who loves his country and human beings in general, without discrimination on the basis of race or sex, and one who tries to contribute to the creation of a better world, also from the ecological point of view."

THIS quote from an article published in an Italian magazine aptly sums up the personality and the achievement of Dr Bindeshwar Pathak who was recently awarded the St. Francis International Prize for Environment in Rome. Sulabh Sauchalay — low cost sanitary systems by which the "Bhangis" (sweepers and the lowest of low scheduled castes) can avoid contact with human excreta — are his contribution. Talking about the man, one often hears a derisive word invariably uttered sarcastically — shit. Yes, Dr Pathak's road to success lies through "shit". By inventing and popularising a simple system, he has not only proved that the ordinary call of the nature can be answered without offending public sensibility, but has also liberated millions of scavengers from the inhuman practice of carrying head loads of night-soil.

Born to Brahmin parents on April 2, 1943, in Rampur Pohiyar village of Vaishali district, Bihar, Dr Pathak inherited his penchant for social service and Gandhian convictions from his maternal grandfather Pandit Jainandan Jha. A staunch Gandhian and a freedom fighter, Jha inculcated in him compassion for the poor and a hatred for unsociability. After a post-graduation degree, Dr Pathak worked for a while with the Bihar State Electricity Board.

"Every revolution begins in the mind" — he is oft quoted to have said. And, it started in his mind when he looks up a job in 1969 during the Gandhi centenary celebrations in Patna. One of the aims

of the celebrations committee was to liberate scavengers. He began by studying literature on public health and hygiene and books on disposal of human excreta in the countryside.

lie quit the job and' duwgndd'y flush toilet which worked independent of any sewerage system. The Sulabh Sauchalaya was thus born. The organisation came into prominence when the Bihar Government banned the construction of new dry latrines in the State through an ordinance in 1974.

Didn't you turn it — voluntary welfare organisations — into a profit-making business establishment? "Yes, I did", Dr Pathak grins — but not without a sense of pride, "If I hadn't made it a self-supporting organisation, it would have died a premature death like its so many predecessors in the field. Any organisation which de pension Government subsidy or donation for its sustenance is bound to collapse", Dr Pathak asserts with conviction, He believes that his success in keeping the high hygienic standards of Sulabh toilets owes it self to the fact that every user has to pay a few paise for the upkeep of the site. In return, the user gets a bit of a soap to wash his hands with. Most of the funds to run the Sulabh International — a non profit foundation — comes from consultancy services and Government contracts to build and maintain public toilets.

"People were apprehensive that nobody would pay to use toilets but I always felt that if one is provided clean toilets one wouldn't mind paying 10 paise. And how true It was! The very first day our collection at the Sulabh toilet in the Gandhi Maidan area of Patna was more than Rs 50", Dr Pathak says. While propagating the message of sanitation and cleanliness, Sulabh has added new dimensions by generating biogas and bio fertilisers. Biogas is being used for generating electricity and cooking gas. "The basic logic



behind this was wealth from waste, "Dr Pathak explains... "We Indians had forgotten that excreta is the best fertiliser," he adds.

#### PROFILE

Sulabh technology is simple. It makes two pits. When one pit gets filled, the other is put into operation. It takes around two years for a pit to fill. So by that time the nightsoil in the first pit turns into fertiliser. It has special layers which soak the water content from the excreta.

Sulabh is also very useful in the areas where water is in short supply. While M'«- the'-flush' system toilets, it feeds 12; 5 ltrs of water to flush the excreta, in Sulabh technology the same work is done with two only.

Sulabh technology, while being in consonance with the Gandhian ideology of liberating scavengers, is anytime better than the septic or sewerage system. Out of 3,245 towns in India only 217 towns have sewerage facilities. Even in these cities, not even one is fully covered by a sewerage system. For that matter even a city like Tokyo is only half-sewered. "Sewer is out dated and is very costly", says Dr Pathak.

Have the liberated scavengers been accepted by the upper castes as their equals? Dr. Pathak is candid enough to answer in the negative. "Changes in attitudes don't come easily. We are persuading Brahmins to help them in learning prayers and entering temples — and to dine with them. Sharing food with an untouchable is the most difficult taboo for a Brahmin to overcome," he comments.

Dr Pathak recently led scavenger families into Nathdwara, a temple town near Udaipur where Brahmins have traditionally prohibited untouchables from worshipping. In the temple, he and other higher caste Hindus shared food publicly with the scavengers' families without any untoward incident. "We persuade, not fight with them," he says.

"Temples and toilets are both for shudhi. While the former is for the Shudhi of atma, (soul) the latter is for the Shudhi of the body. I told my men that these toilets were temples for them. So, keep them clean". This has since become the motto of the Sulabh employees.

To bring about a change in the attitude of upper castes and also to instill a sense of self-confidence in the children of liberated scavenger families, Dr Pathak has started an English-medium public school in the Capital. It has about 40 students, including six to seven children from other castes. He intends to impart to them vocational training "At present, we don't take any fees, we are also thinking of working out an arrangement with the Government for concessions. But, before seeking the Government's help, I want to prove that I have done something on my own," he says. With the help of a 25,000-strong dynamic and committed work force of Sulabh International, Dr Pathak has been able to cover 202 districts (625 towns) in 17 States and two Union Territories in 16 years. About 2,000 public toilets-and-bath complexes have been set up all over the country. Household and public facilities, created by Dr Pathak's organisation, are used by more than six million people daily. Production of biogas from human excreta and its different uses (are) Dr Pathak's another notable achievement.

Dr Pathak has written many books, reports and addressed conferences, national and international. Some of his books are: A Simple Idea that Worked; A Study of Directed Change; Road to Freedom; Scavenging in India (Problem and Solution). He has been honored with a Padma Bhushan and the K.P. Goenka Memorial award for his contribution in the prevention of environmental pollution.

He also has the credit of being the first person in the world to have coined and conceptualised the term "Action Sociology". Action Sociologists, according to Dr Pathak, are those who do not merely give lectures or suggestions on the basis of the findings of others to solve the problems of society and do not remain contented with a preacher's role. His idea of Action Sociology is much wider than Applied Sociology and Sociology in Action.

"The problem in our country is that nobody is willing to tackle the basic issues concerning the society. Everybody just talks of the problems which we all know too well. What we need is solutions which, unfortunately, nobody is willing to offer" Dr Pathak says with a sigh.

THE ASI AN AGE

NEW DELHI FRIDAY 29 JUNE 1994

## From pit to pot, the toilet has come a long way

BY PALASH KUMAR

New Delhi, June 28: In the Europe of 13th century AD, a strange custom existed. As told in the accounts of Sharivari, human waste was thrown at passerbys at the time of carnivals. Even in the 15th century AD, a queer custom prevailed among the Italians of throwing urine at one another during festivals.

In 1600 AD, Louis XIII held court -while using his toilet. His more enterprising minister had a particular penchant for eating horses' dung mixed with white wine.

The toilet used by Henry VIII was covered with black linen, laced with ribbons and 2,000 gold plated rivets. And in the royal palace, there was an exclusive cleaning object for each member of the royal family. Some used linen, others merino, leaves, small stones or pages from books.

During 1609-13 an interesting episode took place. In the box of a theatre, Marchioness Raphelt eased herself and unable to bear the foul smell, threw the stool down the parquet. In ancient Greece, defecating was considered unmanly. So in an attempt to show their superiority, men of the Chaga tribe used to block their anus to prevent excretion. Many would die to prove their masochis. It was commonly believed that swallowing something but not taking it out is the secret of power (authority). It reminds one of political annexation.

In Rome, a common belief was that a society that defecates together, remains united together. And, hence, came the concept of public toilets where 200 people would defecate together to the sounds to musical chores. These are just a few of the startling revelations that have been painstakingly compiled at the Sulabh International Museum of Toilets, a brainchild of Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak, the Founder of Sulabh International, one of the biggest nongovernmental organisations in India working in the field of public sanitation.

The museum traces the history of the evolution of toilets from 2500J3C to 1980 – an interesting ensemble of ready reference material for one interested in knowing more about the toilets than just pulling the flush lever down every morning.

The ultimate aim of the museum authorities is to build three-dimensional models of the various types of toilets used by people over the past 4,000 years. "But that would entail a cost of over Rs. 2.5 crores," says Mr. Mulkh Raj, the Chairman of Sulabh. "We are approaching a number of private concerns to help us in this project. We tried to approach the ASI to help us build a replica of the toilet that existed during the Indus Valley civilisation but they asked for Rs. 5 lakhs. For the moment, the primary concern of Sulabh is to spread awareness and publicise the novel concept."



The museum offers a minefield of interesting anecdotes associated with, the development of toilets. Tracing the history, of toilets from .the Indus Valley civilisation, where a highly developed drainage system existed, the museum documents travel all over Europe where most of the early technological developments in the evolution' of toilets took place.

For many years after the death of the Indus Valley civilisation the dictum: Why are you' concentrating on the loos; the whole world belongs to you - continued to dictate sanitation habits for many people in Europe as neither toilets nor bathrooms in houses existed. People defecated on the streets or in the pots and threw the waste outside their houses. For this very reason, women of rank in London wore overshoes.

In 1088 AD, human waste in Cambridge, was collected on the road and then cartloads of waste was taken and dumped outside the city. In many cities around Europe, till the 19th century, pigs were let loose on the streets to clean up the wastes.

It is interesting to note that in Egypt, the people were very conscious towards environmental pollution and excrement's were not released into rivers. The waste was stored inside the toilets and during the flooding of the Nile, it was used as a cement mixed with fresh soil-.to act as a dam to prevent the flooding of cities.

Toilets also became a place for hatching conspiracies, carrying out assassinations and venues of sexual exploits. In 222 AD, Emperor Heliogabab was assassinated inside the toilet. In Paris, homosexuals were believed to be misusing the toilets and the Paris police started a campaign to prevent toilets being misused by gays. In

the Imperial College at Lyons, half doors were constructed in toilets to prevent students from masturbating.

Strangely, there was also a time when some sort of a stigma came to be attached to toilets - something that is filthy, impolite, and not to be talked about.

Extravagant attempts were made to conceal the toilet equipments like the wardrobe (a wooden closet in the shape of a wardrobe).

In another case the toilet was designed in the shape of a book-shelf. But it was also Edward II (1318 AD) who got locked in his wardrobe and James I was also killed there.

Towards the beginning of the 17th century, trends in toilet culture did a turnaround and toilet talk became a ready source of humour at social gatherings. Poet Woostroque-de-Bolyu became famous owing to his flamboyant poetry on toilets. Any public place in England, the snapping of fingers was considered to be a gesture to the attendants to bring in the chamber pots (a king of portable urinal). The pot-was used in public while continuing the hearty discussions.

The toilet itself assumed various names like Office, That Place Happy Home etc. A polite way of excusing oneself was: "I am going for the plucking of flowers".

In 1843, the roads of Leeds were strewn with human waste and in Butterfield waste fermented and dirty water gathered all over the place. The Paris City of Paris News often lamented the fact that Paris citizens not only urinated in the open but often defecated too. The first major breakthrough came in 1775 when Alexander Cummings, a watch-maker of London, registered his patent for making WC for the first time in England.

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## Elite adoptions

Are they elitist too? Not at all, say prominent citizens who have adopted scavengers to make a dent on the caste monolith.

WHEN Bindeshwar Pathak of Sulabh conceived Sulabh Sansar in 1990, where the rich and the famous were to adopt one scavenger family each, he was alone. Not anymore. Last month, over 20 of the Capital's 'elite' adopted scavengers too. With about six lakh scavenger families all over India, it could be dubbed a token gesture, but Pathak is not concerned about carping critics.

For the past three decades, the non-governmental organisation he heads, Sulabh, has been committed to the liberation of scavengers through low-cost, affordable and viable scavenging-free technology, and training in other skills. Speaking, passionately about their cause, Pathak says: "Apart from the grinding poverty (there is no fixed wage for scavengers), nothing hurts more than social indignity. The people who help keep our environment clean are themselves pushed to the fringes of society. The social upgradation programme, therefore, is an attempt to undo the social injustice done to the Balmikis."

And there seems to be some hope. Over 100 people have so far offered to adopt scavengers under the Sulabh Sansar programme and over 1000 families have been adopted. "In Delhi itself," says Pathak, "we have arranged such adoptions at least twice in the span of four years - one in '92 and another in March '94."

The list of persons who have offered to adopt reads like a who's who of Delhi society. Among them are ministers Margaret Alva and Salman Khursheed, advocates Lalit Bhasin, Laxmi Paul Dhir and K.K. Venugopal, parliamentarian Mani Shanker Aiyar, journalists and bureaucrats.

But while the programme is itself worth commending and is noble in its cause and goals, the question that arises is whether these people are really interested in the well-being of people, or whether it is in the nature of mere-publicity gimmick for them. As Maneka Gandhi, former environment minister, who inaugurated the function last month puts it: "Do good to your own servants first before you look elsewhere."

Going by Minister of State for External Affairs Salman Khursheed's interaction with 64-year old Bengali. Ram (whom he adopted, in February 1992), however, there is considerable ground for optimism: Bengali, from Samana in Ghaziabad, was among the 10 guests at Khursheed's residence this year. The former safai karamchari, who retired in 1990, lives in Palam in a four-bedroom house with this wife and four sons. "I was overwhelmed when visiting the minister's village in Farrukhabad, he introduced me to his relatives as a member of his own family," says Bengali; who has since become the Palam district president of the Akhil Bharatiya Valmiki Samaj Parishad:

Was this the objective? "Definitely not," says Khursheed, brushing off the suggestion. Sipping tea with the minister at his well-appointed and air-conditioned office and talking about scavengers does seem odd but not so to the minister. "My friends call me eccentric, but as far as I am concerned I never bother if the man sitting next to me is an untouchable," he says.

"I wish the distance between my residence and Bengali's house could be shortened to facilitate



more meetings," says Khursheed, who takes time off from the ministerial chores and his weakness for cricket and squash to share a few moments with Bengali and his family whenever he can.

For Supreme Court advocate Lalit Bhasin, adopting a scavenger's family was something he had wanted to do for a long time. The super-rich ambience of his house in Greater Kailash should make one doubt his sincerity towards social causes, but he demurs. "For a person who has been in the legal profession for three-odd decades, social work comes naturally," says Bhasin. "Kitabi has grown up with my own children."

Kitabi, who is from Haryana, ekes out a living by doing household chores in the neighbourhood, while her husband Prem Singh is a gardener. They, along with their three children, live in Madan Gir. The entire family comes to the Bhasins on special occasions. "As I was busy with a conference during Holi this year, I called the family over the next day," says Bhasin.

Yet, much prodding does not make 47-year-old Kitabi partake of the sweets offered by Bhasin in a plate from which he himself is eating. No, she would rather take the sweets home. She is barely able to lift her pallu, especially if saheb is sitting - despite her having been with the family for the past decade. If it is not social stigma, it is the economic barriers that are too vast to be transcended in a single leap. Bhasin, however would like to be more optimistic. "The idea of adoption by the elite is revolutionary. Of course, things progress at a snail's pace, but someone has to take the lead," he says.

Agrees Chitra Naik, member of the Planning Commission, who has adopted the family of Prabhati Lai, a retired postman: "The idea of this kind of adoption is obviously a positive step.

It would help in social redefining images. The outcastes would no longer remain at the fringe but would be incorporated and accepted into advanced society.

Interacting with people of various hues is not new to Naik. She was earlier doing field work for a research project for the Indian Institute of Education, Pune. "Since they have a large family of six sons and four daughters. Prabhati and his wife Ramamurthy often come to me with family-related problems," she says. Naik would, like Sulabh or some other such organisation to arrange get-togethers where even more and more people can be reached out to.

For Air Commodore (retired) A.L.- Saigal. "The main purpose of a programme like this is to give an opportunity to the lowliest of the lowly classes to sit together with people considered higher up on the social ladder." Speaking about the incidence of untouchability, Saigal says Ratan Lai (a chaprasi in his office whom he has adopted) had a separate shamiana for the upper castes during his daughter's wedding. "In Gurgaon, where I live, there are actually very few scavengers. The prevalent prejudices are such that the people condemned to be in the same level of society are considered untouchables," says Saigal, who is the general secretary of the Movement for National Resurgence.

Former external: affairs minister I.K. Gujral who has also offered to adopt a family, says: "Health and hygiene are essential parts of any society. It is regrettable that those who perform this function are denied any social status and are put down as untouchables." As he puts it, any social uplift programme has to begin from scratch. Who makes the first dent in the caste monolith will be immaterial.

- Niti Singh

By FARZANA VERSEY XVII SUNDAY MID-DAY, MARCH 20, 1994

LIFELINE

## SCAVENGING ANGEL

DR. BINDESHWAR PATHAK shows us how to answer nature's call, the way nature wished us to: with dignity. And no, the idea did not come to him while sitting on the potty.

In fact, in spite of his rather glib introduction, his mission is not so much to get ecstatic about excreta as to free those unknown slaves who till this day carry nightsoil on their heads in wicker baskets.

We abhor them, they who clean our remains; we find them dirty without realising that it is our dirt they are carrying. Half a million of them, maybe more, resigned to their fate, until someone thought it fit to liberate them.

The first name that comes to mind is Mahatma Gandhi, but besides giving them a pretty word, Harijan, and indulging in token gestures, what did he achieve in concrete terms, whatever may have been his genuine concerns? This is not to belittle the great man. As a matter of fact, this is where Dr. Pathak's initiation started-

In 1968, as part of the centenary celebrations of Gandhi's birthday, a Bhangi Mukti Cell was set up to find a solution to end scavenging.

Bindeshwar, a jobless 25-year-old Brahmin, from a family of freedom fighters, was made the convenor. But, as he admitted, "I took up this job simply because I was assured of a sustenance allowance."

The Gandhi influence was of course there in spirit. "He was the first to notice that a problem existed, but of his millions of followers only five to 10 % took part in this particular mission.

"There was therefore no tangible result during his lifetime. When I travelled in the villages and lived in the *bastis* as a *pracharak* where I was supposed to propagate the teachings of

the Mahatma I found a lurking contempt in the faces of the people who had high regard for all that the Mahatma preached, but they demanded result-oriented action and not mere sermons.

"My contribution is that I modified that technique of our toilet and developed and implemented an alternative., I am neither a research scholar, nor an expert on sanitation, nor an inventor.

"But the conversion of dry latrines into water-flush latrines, and freeing human beings from the indignity of carrying nightsoil as headload, has been an article of faith for me."

It was faith together with a sturdy commonsense that made him start Sulabh International in 1970, which is not merely about toilets-cum-bathing complexes (though, come to think of it, who would have thought that people would pay for using these facilities in this country?) but a movement to free scavengers from the shackles that have been binding them for centuries and to rehabilitate them.

Since 1968, he has liberated 3,0,000 scavengers; 6,00,000 dry latrines have been converted into stinkless, ecology-friendly Sulabh toilets in 625 towns (there are 4,000 towns in

India) and over 3000 community toilets have been set up all over the country.

Now about six million people use these complexes daily. Yet, the panacea is still a dream. For 70 crore people, more than the population of America and Europe, defecate in the open.

The messiah knows that there is more required than the spreading of the message. There is indignation in his voice as he says, "I see that



300 million women do not have the basic human right of a toilet. Human rights should include food, shelter and sanitation. We cannot sit back and say that the task is done. Earlier I was alone, today I have 35,000 people working with me."

SOME PEOPLE probably think he is mad. In fact, it is a trifle strange to watch him in action at his headquarters. Here is this strapping, well-groomed man sitting in his plush cabin looking like the potentate of an exclusive field (which is a way he is) and then just as suddenly he is out opening the door enthusiastically to his creation - a toilet block.

Like a schoolboy who has made his first discovery he shows us how it works and, then, with equal zest, he is fingering a handful of what looks like tea leaves. It turns out to be organic manure made from, yes, human excreta.

However, you do realise that man cannot live by looks alone, and certainly not an action sociologist with an MA and a gold medal in English and Sociology. So, what is the secret?

Does he not regret the fact that with his qualifications and cutzpah he could have been high up in some corporate ladder, earning big bucks, instead of messing about with the end product of our digestive system?

He smiles ever-so-indulgently and says, "If I had started in a multinational company I would have been successful and wealthy, but now I have got wealth from waste. Besides, my approach is managerial in whatever I do. I keep two options ready, so if one fails there is always the other.

If all this sounds like cakewalk to you just wait. It wasn't and it isn't. Let us face it, Pathak was dealing with a taboo subject, no one would touch it.

As he recalls, "At my mother's funeral we decided to feed not only the Brahmins, but everyone. Here I observed that the Dussads and the Chamars, both considered low caste, would not sit together. The Brahmins too have their own gradations. The worst thing in

Hinduism is untouchability."

He had first hand exposure to the silent snobberly in his own household. Whenever women of low birth entered their house his grandmother would sprinkle waste as soon as they left.

Pathak was intrigued as any child would have been. "I wondered whether we'd change colour if we came in contact with them." Being a man of action even then, he started brushing past them as they left and found no change either in his colour or his demeanour. But one day he was caught touching one of them by his grandma who promptly gave him some cowdung to eat to purify himself.

He does not look upon these memories as pathbreaking stimuli that sowed the seeds of reform in his soul. They are merely evidence of the state of things as they were, are, and, he shudders to think, will be if nothing is done soon.

"It is quite pathetic to see the way things are even today. A deputy manager at a bank asked as to adopt him for he said that although he was a manager during the office hours, outside the premises he was still considered a scavenger."

At one time Pathak had his own doubts too. Once at the Harijan Colony he walked into the toilets and found them filthy. He got them cleaned and the people there were shocked. "I told them that while they did not mind cleaning other people's toilets they were ashamed to clean their own."

This incident gave him an insight into the nature of attitudes and the fact that opposition could come from anywhere. Accusations run fast and deep cutting through the revolutionary zeal.

But he remains unfazed. "God has sent us as players. Those who are on our side are players as also those who are our competitors. I have no enemies. I have merely started a revolution. One has to start a movement and then implement it. Management is the key. There is no patent, royalty or commission.

Going Against the tide works both ways. It happened long years ago to the inventor of the water closet in England who was banished from the Elizabethan court for discussing something as indelicate as a disposal system for faeces.

But once London was fitted with WCs and the sewer worked fine, Harrington, the courtier in question, was discovered to be the harbinger of modern civilisation.

It might be too early to declare the Sulabh movement in such honorific terms, but if you go by the treatment Pathak has had to face it could some very close.

"Every successful person faces opposition", he agrees, sportingly. "As long as you are a ripple no one will look at you, but the moment you become a wave you are noticed. Unfortunately no one asks, about the quality that makes a man successful, though they are always ready to cast aspersions on him. Bureaucrats are prejudiced and journalists and politicians don't bother me."

Coming from a man who has got good press and government recognition in the form of the Padma Bhushan it might seem a little surprising. Open any of the booklets he hands you and he is photographed with some celebrity.

Of course, bringing in the government could mean kowtowing to its warped sense of social justice, giving in to pressure and wasting time and resources in under utilised areas only because one of our dear public servants wants to gain instant popularity.

But shauchalayas don't spring out of thin air or natural urges. They need money. "The question when we started was, where do we get it from. For two years we wanted donations. But a conversation with a government official changed all that. He told us that if we took a grant, once it was over, the work would come to a stop. We decided to do away with red-tapism."

Sulabh International does not accept grants from either the state or central governments

or from any agency, national or international. It charges 10 to 20 per cent of the estimated, cost of the work being done, which could mean about Rs. 8 crore a year to spend on organisational and rehabilitation activities.

Sulabh's workers, unlike Gandhi's followers, are no sants, points out Pathak quite candidly.

"We do not. know how to get Moksha through religion. We accept that you need strength it can come through knowledge or wealth or conviction."

In his position there could be conflict between need and ideology but he has managed to poise himself over the delicate imbalance and create an area, open to further exploration.

Would his job end merely by ensuring that scavengers did not have to manually clean latrine? Would they be socially uplifted? He decided not to rest on his or achievement and ignore the rot it arose from. Why could Harijans not enter temples?

This was a malaise, but how true was it? In 1988 he decided to learn the truth. He proceeded to Nathdwara in Udaipur with five pandits and a group of 102 Harijan boys and girls.

The first day he met the priests there registering himself as Bindeshwar Raut, a low caste name. No one stopped him from entering. Next day the whole group proceeded inside and were warmly welcomed. He learnt what he had come to seek: "Is there a temple anywhere where you are asked what caste you are before you enter?"

The other query was regarding low caste people not being permitted to draw water from wells belonging to the upper castes. Instead of moping over this Pathak decided that the Harijans must have such well-constructed wells that the upper-caste folk be tempted to draw water from them.

He has turned the tables, if we notice how well-maintained some of the shauchalayas are. At Jaipur, it meshes so beautifully with the architectural ambience of the Pink City that



one could mistake it for an original structure.

Sulabh also works on the principle of win-win. After conversion of a dry latrine it offers a five-year guarantee to take care of any technical problem or construction defect.

Dr. Pathak is too much on his feet to be content as a planner and thinker. Like Jawaharlal Nehru, who said "The day everyone of us gets a toilets to use, I shall know that our country has reached the pinnacle of progress," he already has it all chalked out.

By 2000 AD we can reach this goal, he believes, if Rs. 1200 crore can be provided for pourflush toilets in individual houses and Rs. 400 crore for the training and rehabilitation of liberated scavengers and their wards.

While the enterprising among them find some ancillary industry, like selling tooth-cleaners at the shauchalayas. Sulabh does not sit pretty on past laurels.

It is a god's world out there, all after the same bone. One with a history of cringing in a corner is hardly likely to be transformed into a go-getter only because his father has stopped cleaning toilets.

It takes brainwashing and instilling of confidence. At Sulabh they are trying to do just that. There is a school for scavengers' children. The students are neatly dressed and, though one does not want to sound patronising, it may be said, they look like any other.

Which is exactly why one must question the basis of their isolation. How will it help them to become a part of the mainstream if they are in their little cubby holes.

To his credit Pathak sees sense in this and has start inviting those from other castes. Even the technical examinations, are held by the Industrial Training Institutes "to gauge whether we have taught them well or not." From the fourth standard they are initiated into computers to acclimatise them with what happens in. the concrete jungle. But they are also taken to the villages to keep them in touch with their roots.

All this sounds too much like an idyll, specially if it is all done in English, except for the occasional Sanskrit sholka that is thrown in almost as exotica. Why English? "If they have to compete, English must go to them. Hindi will not replace it for the next 100 years. The mistake of the Gandhians was to do things in an 18th century manner. There was an emphasis on externals.

"But I would not call someone who listen to English music bad. The Gandhian philosophy must be modernised. Liberation can come through rehabilitation, education, training and social upgradation.

He seems to think that the last can also come about with constant exposure to other castes. In an unique scheme well-known persons adopt a scavenger family socially.

People like YV Chandrachud, Margaret Alva and Justice Tarkunde have already shown an interest. In fact, the best host receives an award with a cash prize of Rs. 1 lakh instituted by Sulabh International. Last year's winner was Salman Khurshid.

Does this not amount to buying social acceptance for the scavengers?

Pathak has his reason. "If we do not offer cash people might not take us seriously. We must also understand that if a man nourishes a family for ten years he is not doing it for a lakh, but because he believes in it."

And for Pathak belief is the bottomline and the topmost priority. To see a family, until now caught in the humiliating circle of deceit by an uncarting society, smiling, proud and accepted, that would be his moment of truth.

As he says so earnestly, "If anyone is a scavenger today it is I, who have lived with them for 25 years. It people can socialise with me, why not with them?"

If Mahatma Gandhi gave them a name, Pathak is-all set to give them an identity. And while at it, he takes away the stink from both our noses and our consciences.

THE SUNDAY TIMES OF INDIA

24, January 1993

## REVIEW

# Its The Pits

Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak, the man behind the chain of Sulabh toilet complexes in the country, is a saviour of scavengers  
writes Janak Singh

Young Mastram, sporting the Brahmin's knot of hair and a large *tilak* on the forehead, playfully hugged a Dom servant one day in an obscure village in Bihar's Vaishali district. The punishment was instantaneous. He was made to swallow a pitcherful of a 'purifying mixture' of *gangajal*, cowdung and sand.

The ordeal was so nerve-racking that Mastram began to think deeply about the unfairness of caste taboos. He resolved to help make life better for the lower castes when he grew up.

Mastram, now Bindeshwar Pathak, studied sociology, acquired a doctorate and wrote on the scavengers - the victims of the inhuman and insanitary practice of manually cleaning and physically carrying human waste as a headload. He discovered that nearly half a million scavengers exist in India alone, leading segregated lives of absolute poverty and degradation. The idea of Sulabh Shauchalaya Sansthan was thus born.

Later renamed as Sulabh International, the organisation is non-governmental, voluntary and works on a no-profit basis. It was launched with the help of volunteer engineers, environmentalists and other experts. Its sole aim was to provide low-cost sanitation to replace the dry privies that have to be manually cleaned by scavengers. By 'liberating' more than 30,000 people who hitherto worked as scavengers and organising to train them to take up other alternatives, Dr. Pathak has, in a sense, proved to be a latter-day Mahatma. Today, the 3,000 Sulabh toilet complexes installed in slums and shanty towns all over India, are being used by 10 million people. In fact, Dr. Pathak's technological innovation has been recommended for adoption all over the Third World by the WHO, UNICEF, UNDP and the World Bank.

As the name 'Sulabh' suggests, it is a simple system - consisting of two pits with a sealed cover into which human waste is discharged from a toilet. The toilet uses very little water to flush the waste away. One pit is used while the other is a stand by. When one gets filled up, the waste flow is directed to the second. And after 18 months, the human excreta in the first pit gets incorporated into the ground and may then be used as manure?

A 'Sulabh Shauchalayas' is a water-flushed toilet connected to these twin pits. It can be adapted to different hydrogeological and physical conditions. Dr. Pathak has also introduced the pay-and-use maintenance system for public toilets. The Sulabh complexes also provide bathing and washing facilities. Many local bodies have adopted the pay-and-use maintenance system, and it is considered a boon for metropolitan cities like Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta and Madras.

But, perhaps most importantly, the complexes have also become centre of biogas production. Sixty such plants in the country are producing enough biogas to light street lights, heat water and cook. The electricity needs of a bus stand in Ranchi have also been met with by the same procedure.

Dr. Pathak is also the recipient of the Saint Francis Prize for his conscious effort to provide a nature-friendly alternative to open defecation. (St. Francis of Assisi was an illustrious example of man's harmonious relationship with nature) Dr. Pathak looks back at his contribution with a sense of fulfillment. He often recalls the words of Pope John Paul II on the evening the third International Prize for the Environment was declared in the Vatican's Apostolic Palace: "Man's true role lies in the authoritative service towards



INDIAN EXPRESS, MARCH 11, 1992 (DELHI EDITION)

## Sulabh's agents of change

by Usha Rai

When Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak first proposed that people pay for use of clean toilet facilities, everyone sniggered. But he has demonstrated it can be done provided there is will power and the necessary management skills.

Now Dr. Pathak has come out with a novel but much needed programme to transform life in rural areas by providing basic facilities through a cadre of specially trained "agents of change". He is seeking the cooperation of industrial houses and NRIs to run these district centres of rural development by investing Rs. 3 to 6 lakh on each centre. In return for the investment, the centre will bear the name of the benefactor. About a 1000 donors who care for India's villages are needed for the network.

The 'agents of change' or the missionaries will not be working gratis. They will be able to earn Rs. 1200 a month by providing various services to the villagers for a fee of Rs. 5 to 15, which most people are willing to pay. The whole concept has stemmed from the innate belief that even missionaries and idealists need to support themselves in the villages otherwise missionary zeal will lose its fervour.

The men and women who will bring about the change in our villages have to undergo three months training at a cost of Rs. 700 a month at the district level. They, in turn, will go out and train functionaries for each of the 30 panchayats that make a district. The district-level agent will train village people in masonry, construction and maintenance of toilets, biogas units and repair of hand pumps.

Simple healthcare facilities will be provided with the help of villagers trained in yoga as well

as by tapping the skills of the naturopaths. Though they will not take over the immunisation programme, the village worker will liaise between the block doctor and the village communities. Children will be lined up for their shots and records will be maintained by the villagers. Social forestry and pavement of roads and drains are among the skills to be imparted to the village workers.

Even in the field of education, the agents of change will intervene. They will identify unemployed matriculates and graduates who will run the primary schools.

The village functionaries to get the training will

be identified by the *mukhias*. By charging a modest fee of Rs. 600 for three months training Dr. Pathak feels that committed workers will come into the programme. Some 2 lakh people will get jobs - a lakh in the rural areas. Literature on "Sulabh goes to rural India" has been prepared in 15 languages and will be distributed to the village functionaries.

So far the equipment that had to be replaced whether it was a pipe or a pan for a toilet was kept at the district headquarters. Now they will be available in the village itself and thus save time in carrying out repairs.

A modest demonstration of the feasibility of the project was provided in five villages of Bhondsia, Haryana, between March and July last year when 100 toilets were constructed - 50 per cent of them paid for by the Modis and another 5% of the cost provided by the users. Sulabh charged a small fee for supervision of the construction.

A modest share of the earnings at the panchayat, block and district level is given to Sulabh so that it can attend to unforeseen problems and has resources of its own. Dr. Pathak plans to use computers to keep track of developments in the network of panchayats.

Sulabh has established six lakh individual toilets in urban and rural areas. Some 30,000 scavengers have been freed from carrying night soil. They are now employed by the civic bodies. Over 3,000 of their children have been trained for employment in the leather industry as well as tailors, masons, drivers and carpenters.

"Adopt a scavengers family" scheme is gaining ground. A hundred scavenger families have been adopted in Patna. Their families are invited for social gatherings by the adopting family. In Delhi, 450 families of scavengers have been identified and some have already been adopted. Salman Khurshid, Deputy Ministry for Commerce and Dr. Chitra Naik, Member, Planning Commission, are looking after two families.

Sulabh's basic rural services project has already been launched. It is doing well in Samastipur. In Gaya, Patna and Ranchi, electricity is being generated from the human waste in public toilets. Some 60 biogas units in Bihar, UP and one each in Delhi and Haryana are running on human waste.

After a seven-year evaluation, World Bank and the UNDP are promoting the Sulabh model for other developing countries like Indonesia and Pakistan.

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## NOT TO DRINK

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Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak's statement on the toll children's lives have taken by what he described as unsafe drinking water and inadequate sanitation deserves wider notice than it has received so far. Dr Pathak, who attended an international meeting in Norway on water supply and sanitation, says about 4.6 million children below five years die annually in developing countries because of these two causes, and that a third of these deaths, or over 1.5 million, occur in India alone. Several hundred million people have no access to safe water and about 54% of the population in urban areas are without proper sanitation facilities. In the rural areas, an astounding 97% lacked such facilities. This is in spite of the International Water Decade which ended a year ago, the work of a high-profile technology mission on drinking water supply, and implementation of the much advertised 20-point programme. Official statistics corroborate what is, in effect, an indictment. The Health Ministry has admitted in its annual report that 'a fourth of the mortality among children, about 1.5 million of them, is due to diarrhoea. The Health Ministry's prescription would seem to be primarily oral rehydration

therapy, whereas the real need is provision of safe water supply and the arresting of water pollution.

The Government's task is not an easy one. Dr Pathak estimates that the requirement would be around \$36 billion annually for the Third World, perhaps a third of that sum from India alone. The problem is compounded by uncontrolled population growth, especially among the deprived sections, which neutralizes whatever progress is made. Filtered water supply where it exists is contaminated later through pollutions and woefully attended distribution systems. In Bangalore, once known for the highest civic standards, drinking water was recently found to be contaminated to the appalling extent of 68.75 percent. The Water Resources Ministry Secretary, Mr M. A. Chitale, feels the Government cannot hope to do much without community support. A tempting thought frequently expressed: but if voluntary agencies are to take over the functions of municipalities, why should municipalities exist and why should citizens pay their civic taxes to keep these monuments to inefficiency alive.



## SCIENCE

## The privy with a purpose

If a million and a half Indian children die each year from diarrhoeal diseases like dysentery, hookworm and cholera, it is largely because our management of the disposal of human wastes is either unscientific or altogether nonexistent. Whilst almost all rural Indians defecate out in the open leading to infection through flies and water-systems - two-thirds of even urban Indians either defecate indiscriminately in public and open spaces, or "are served by the dry-pit latrine - a system in which the waste is manually removed from a dry cavity by scavengers, a caste entrusted by society with what Mahatma Gandhi called the "inhuman unhealthy and hateful" practice of carrying headloads of nightsoil.

So overwhelming is the problem even in urban India, that only 217 of our 3,245 towns have any sewerage systems at all. Even these systems usually cover only small portions of these towns: the National Sample Survey finds that only 20 per cent of Urban households have toilets connected to sewerage systems, and 13 per cent of even these are either shared or are community toilets.

Perhaps nothing speaks of the sad state of affairs more than the fact that in Delhi itself the most, pampered of our urban conglomerates - around three million people still defecate out in the open. And this is what makes the achievement of Sulabh International, a Patna-based organisation which in 10 years has built three lakh inexpensive, hygienic and scavenger-free privies all over the country, such a remarkable and commendable one.

The Sulabh story started in 1969, when

Bindeshwar Pathak, an honours-graduate in sociology, found a job with Bihar's Gandhi Centenary Celebration Committee as a prachorak entrusted with popularising Gandhi's ideas in the villages. To his dismay, Pathak found that whenever he held village meetings, there was "a lurking contempt on the faces of the villagers.. as they demanded "concrete result-oriented action instead of mere sermons".

Unable to convince his colleagues in the Bhangi Mukti Cell of the committee about the need to actually undertake the construction of lavatories. Pathak resigned. He then dug up a vintage design for a simple privy which had been lying under layers of dust at an institute and went on a long hunt for a government grant in Patna's corridors of power. Finally, a sympathetic official arranged a grant of Rs. 20 lakh, but advised Pathak to aim, ultimately, at financial self-sufficiency. And this, Pathak's organisation - the Sulabh Shauchalaya Sansthan - has more than achieved in the 10 years of its existence.

Just what is a Sulabh Shauchalaya? Briefly, it is a small, self-contained WC (water-closet) system which need not be attached to any sewage-line. Its real importance for a country like India lies in its low-cost, as compared with the conventional sewerage and septic tank systems. The World Bank, for instance, estimates that a sewerage system for those parts of Patna that do not now have one, would cost Rs. 235 crore. plus Rs. 10 crore per year for its maintenance (yet the entire budget of the Impecunious Patna Municipal Corporation is less than Rs. 3 crore). A system of Sulabh Shauchalayas, on the

other hand, would, if installed in the same areas, require only Rs. 2.16 crore and maintenance cost would be almost nil. Besides, even in places where sewerage systems have been built in India with World Bank funds, dry-pit latrines have often continued to be in use. One major reason for under-utilisation of such expensive systems is the lack of adequate water. As for the septic tank, it too is expensive, and perpetuates our dependence on the bhangi.

No sweeper is required for a Sulabh privy, which basically consists of two parts. One is a commode made of mortar clay, husk and cowdung wash which works out much cheaper than the standard china-dry pan and is stronger than it. The other part, which is connected to the commode, consists of twin pit-tanks, which are sunk four feet deep in the ground, and sealed on top with thick RCC. to prevent the exposure of their contents to flies, as well as any leakage of fies, as well as any leakage of gas, unlike the septic tank, however, these pits are earth-based at the bottom, to enable all liquid wastes to leech into the soil below. Naturally, requisite care is taken to ensure that the pits ore at a safe distance above the ground-water level.

The solid waste in the pits decomposes by the action of soil bacteria, into excellent organic manure which, according to the compost wing of the Bihar government, is better than that produced from animal wastes. The two pits work alternately: when one is fairly full, it is closed off by a simple process, which brings the other one into play, and permits the first one to begin decomposing its contents. Every five years or more (by which time the compost is thoroughly free of pathogens, and all the gases in the pit have been absorbed by the soil, leaving the manure quite odourless), the manure can be removed without any unpleasantness, either by the house-owner himself, or by a hired hand or the Sulabh people themselves. The pits, whose contents shrink dramatically as they decompose are, therefore, built quite small in size. They save valuable space in urban areas

as they can be constructed under drawing room floors under kitchen or courtyards or just about anywhere else in a house.

Whilst economy of space is one cost advantage involved, the economy of water is another. Only a couple of mugs of water are required to push nightsoil out of the Sulabh commode into the pit-tank, the reason being the special shape of the commode and that of the small water seal below it. The over-all cost of installing a Sulabh unit too, is quite low, at Rs 700 in Patna city. All in all, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has assessed that if Sulabh privies were to cover the whole of urban India, this would cost the country only about Rs 4.315 crore. whereas a conventional sewerage system could cost around eight times more. Thus should the system be adopted on a national scale, as it promises to be (Sulabh works in 16 states today), it could take a major financial burden off the public exchequer.

In Patna itself, one third if all privies are now Sulabh ones. Any householder, who is persuaded by the organisation to install a unit in his house, gets 50 per cent of its cost as a grant under a Central bhangi liberation scheme, while: the rest of the cost comes to him from a local government agency as a soft loan, and Sulabh itself gets a commission for installing the unit. Says E.B. Sahai, Bihar's Urban Development Secretary: "Of the Rs. 17 crore earmarked for this department for 1986-87, Rs. 4 crore is (or low-cost sanitation alone: this shows the priority being given to it."

The system is particularly suitable for Patna city, the height of which is lower than the height of the river Ganga itself which means that the authorities are reduced to pumping out excess water after lifting it with power-driven pumps. "But", says a Sulabh official, "of the 36 pumps in Patna, all but a dozen or so are out of order. Also, of the two sewerage plants, one is lying closed down, and the other has not yet been commissioned, for lack of resources. "Not surprisingly, the government has now also involved Sulabh in



the Ganga Action Plan it is implementing.

In future, the various state governments could benefit even more whereas today, state governments provide grants and land for the construction of community or public privies by Sulabh, this organisation has the future potential to pay for these units itself, and to dispense with government money altogether by producing gas: At its 54-latrine community complex in Adalatganj in Patna Sulabh produces methane gas from the collected nightsoil, which is used for generating 300 units of electricity a day which, in turn, lights up four kilometres of the busy Bailey Road in the city. For this, it collects a nominal fee from the municipality.

The real value of the production of this electricity will, however, emerge only if the government were to amend the Electricity Act, to enable this organisation to sell the electricity it produces, at the prevailing commercial rates; Sulabh could then not only pay for the land and other costs of putting up public privies, but be able to make a good profit as well. This profit could go into the further diversification of its activities in the field of sanitation. At the moment, however, the Adalatganj complex remains but a test-cum-demonstration centre, a mute testimony to the exciting fact that small power plants based on human wastes are an economically viable proposition.

The possibilities offered by Sulabh have attracted the attention of half a dozen other developing countries, which seek its advice. The margin made by this organisation from the construction of privies is often ploughed back into socially constructive activities: Users of the Adalatganj complex, for instance, can avail of the free services of a panel of nine doctors who treat digestive and other minor ailments. Soon, the complex will also be performing family planning operations. The rickshaw-pullers, hotel-hands and pavement-dwellers who frequent the willing-even are grateful to part with 20 paise each morning, to be able to use the place, in which free soap and baths can

also be had. The payment however, is not compulsory, and women, children and the very poor are admitted free.

Another progressive activity has been the setting up of an institution which trains the children of scavengers in alternative trades, and already it has drawn over 2,000 such youngsters away from their parents degrading vocation. Says Meena Devi, a tailoring student at this institute "I used to help my mother clean endless rows of dry latrines, and invariably, we would soil both our hands and our heads, as drums of excreta had to be carried on the head. "She and dozens of girls and boys from the scavenger community will be helped, later on, to get loans to actually buy the sewing machines they are now learning to sew on.

According to B. N. Prasad, the retired Inspector-General of the Central Reserve Police Force who runs the show, one of the greatest challenges of his job is to give his students a sense of their own worth, as they come to him with strong inferiority complexes. This is achieved in many subtle ways, ranging from serving them their hostel food in steel utensils, to making them perform Saraswati Puja, a right society has always denied them. The numerous courses taught at the institute are all pragmatically short, whether it is the one-year motor-mechanics course, or the shorter carpentry and leather working ones.

As Sulabh has grown, so has its need to recruit good managers: a new wing now recruits and trains engineering graduates. "We don't just learn about the conversion of dry privies into Sulabh ones," says a young trainee, Asim Kumar Thakur "We will also be implementing schemes, in future, connected with things like smokeless chullahs, handpump-repair and maternal and childcare." Most of the youngsters, says another recruit, Ashwini Kumar, will return to their villages to work, as their powers of persuasion there will be greater. Starting at salaries slightly higher than government pay-scales, the boys can leave Sulabh anytime (in the absence of any

bond) as the organisation wishes to retain only those who are eager to stay "For the first time ever", remarks A.K. Dhan, a former university vice-chancellor and currently Chairman of Sulabh, "engineers are being involved in social work."

Bindeshwar Pathak himself surmises that if the organisation continues to grow the way it is now doing, it could create around 5,000 jobs in five years, since the money for implementing schemes is made available by the government. But isn't there a danger of it becoming, ultimately, an unwieldy bureaucracy, with all the ills associated with it? "Well, not as long as we can continue to hire and fire," says Pathak candidly. The government authorities, he points out, are unable to succeed at maintaining clean municipal lavatories, because public servants are lackadaisical. Adds N. Mishra, a former Secretary to the government and now Vice-Chancellor of Sulabh: "Often, government-built lavatories do not serve their intended purpose, because of lack of adequate water. Sulabh privies, on the other hand, work because very little water is needed to keep them clean.

In the state of its birth, Sulabh had liberated almost a dozen towns, such as Arrah, Motihari and Mettiala, from the curse of the dry-pit latrine. Hoardings and signboards that once warned the lay public of the dire

consequences if it fouled the sidewalks, have given way to others, politely requesting people to step round the corner to the nearest Sulabh complex. At dozens of railway stations, public parks and crowded markets, which earlier stank to the high heavens, human wastes have safely and hygienically been pushed underground, at no great cost to the public treasury. This is an important occurrence, not just for India, but for all developing countries: The reason, of course, is that whilst four-fifths of the human population lives in these countries, none of them can ever instal and maintain sophisticated and integrated sanitation systems, because of the severe investment-capital constraints from which they suffer.

As a Bihar Gandhi Centenary Celebrations Committee pracharak, Bindeshwar Pathak found himself confronted with an indifferent audience, while trying to popularise Gandhi's ideas in the villages. And so was born Sulabh, which has built three lakh inexpensive privies in the country in 10 years. Indeed, this experiment has been so successful that it is likely to be replicated in other developing countries, reports BULBUL PAL



# Innovative Projects To Protect the Poor in India From Diarrhoeal diseases

It well recognized that lack of safe water and poor sanitation are a major cause of death and ill health. While access to drinking water has increased considerably over the past decade in India. About 120 million homes still do not have toilet facilities. The adverse impact of unsafe water on health continues and the Ministry of Health estimated about 600,000 deaths per year due to diarrhoea. Most diarrhoeal deaths occur in children under the age of five. The story of a work of an NGO, Sulabh International has done pioneering work in the field of sanitation. It is also the story of a collaborative effort between WHO, Population Services International (PSI) and Sulabh to bring safe water to the country.



Sulabh Change agent talks to slum women about safe water.

The Sulabh Sanitation movement started in India over three decades ago. Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak, a social activist wanted India something to liberate the 'scavengers' or 'untouchables'. Who are amongst the poorest people. They earned their livelihood by cleaning toilets and carrying manually, human excreta. Euphemistically called night soil. It was the dream of Mahatma Gandhi to abolish scavenging, a totally demeaning activity.

Whilst looking into the problems of scavenging, Dr. Pathak came across a WHO publication,

Excreta disposal in rural areas and small communities". Which described the advantages of the Pit privy as the most adversal and applicable latrine design. He modified and developed further this technology, and from it emerged the pour flush water toilet. Later renamed the "Sulabh Shaughalaya."

Sulabh pay and use toilets, using the two-pit pour flush model have been immensely successful. They are hygienically and environmentally appropriate, effective. Easy to construct and culturally acceptable. Maintenance is simple. It requires little water and does not require any manual cleaning. Sulabh has constructed over a million such toilets in individual homes as well as public toilet complexes where none existed. This has relieved about 50,000 scavengers from their demeaning job. Children and the very poor are allowed to use the public toilets free. While the rest pay for their use. These complexes provide services for over 10 million people every day throughout the country. While these facilities have helped to improve the living conditions of the community significantly. Each set up is self sustainable. The electricity required in running one of the biggest complexes at a popular pilgrimage point in Western India, daily visited by tens of thousands of people, generates its own electricity from the biogas produced from human excreta of the users. The biogas can be used for various purposes including street and home lighting, and even for cooking. Sulabh's research and development led to the generation of biogas and biofertilizer from excreta based plants, waste water treatment through duckweed and aerobic vermin composting, an innovative method for composting vegetable waste.

Sulabh has trained over 6000 women volunteers to work in urban slums, in

collaboration with national and international agencies, on all aspects of environmental sanitation. It's ready workforce has also recently joined hands in a safe water project with WHO SEAR, and PSI.



Dr. Pathak interacting with scavengers many of whose lives have been changed through Sulabh.

Recently, a safe water system (SWS) India. The SWS is a water quality intervention that uses simple, inexpensive technologies, which are appropriate for the developing world to prevent mortality and morbidity associated with diarrhoeal diseases. Developed in Latin America by the WHO, the Pan American Health Organization and the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, the system has been successfully used in several countries, in Africa and Asia. SWS reduces the number of diarrheal episodes, at least by half.

It is actually a very simple device, The kit consists of a bottle of 0.5% sodium hypochlorite solution (chlorine) which is to be used to disinfect

Beside the hardware. It's use is supported with behaviour change communications to improve hygiene and sanitation practices. Best of all it is extremely easy to use and is low cost on less than twenty cents USD to protect a family of six for one month PSI is doing the social marketing of the product.

The SWS has already been tried successfully around the globe in countries like Bolivia, Ecuador Zambia, Uzbekistan, Guatemala and Guinea Bissan, among others.

In India, SWS was first launched in one state – Orissa, under the name Safewat. Like in most parts of the country 80% of households in Orissa do not purify water. Till such time that the quality of all drinking water can be assured. The use of methodologies like safe water will at least protect families from diarrhoeal diseases caused by water.

A pilot intervention is now underway in 12 urban slums in New Delhi This two-year pilot covers a population of approximately 150,000, WHO HAS PROVIDED THE FUNDING PSI is creating access to the disinfectant and the water container and also developing a behaviour change communication strategy Sulabh International Institution of Health and Hygiene is providing the on the ground support, Sulabh already has a strong presence in the pilot area. It has built and operates six public toilets there. Their staff has provided training to over 6000 residents of Delhi slums on hygiene and sanitation related issues.

Over 1500 change agents, all residents of the target slum have been identified to carry out interpersonal communication activities. An innovative measure to ensure sustainability is to let these volunteers market the SWS vessel and disinfection. Their margin of earning on each sale would motivate them further. These women go to the slums and talk about hygiene and water handling practices as well as demonstrate how to use the Safewat product.

SWS products are now being placed at retail outlets in the pilot area to ensure their availability once the demand has been created by the change agents.

Safewat will soon be marketed in other states of India also gradually. Residents of the slums and other under served populations will have access to safe water and this would protect family health, at least from diarrhoeal diseases, a major problem in most developing countries.



# Views of the Press and People

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- "Scavengers have been receiving discrimination in action in the caste system of India, which has still strong presence in society. "SULABH", an NGO is the one that has come to work for their freedom and has been working to promote cheap and simple toilets, where water is used for cleaning".  
*-Asahi Shimbun (Japanese Daily Newspaper)*
- 'Pathak started the Sulabh movement in 1970 to improve sanitation technology in the country and restore the dignity of those, who earn their living by carrying night-soil.'  
*-Reuters Despatch*
- 'Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak draws inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi's movement to improve the lives of Dalits.'  
*-Reuters*
- 'Gandhi used the Spinning Wheel to start the Freedom Movement and Dr. Pathak, a member of Brahmin caste, has chosen toilet for sanitation movement.'  
*-The Asian Wall Street Journal. (June 22, 1996)*
- "Untouchables Gain the Help of Brahmin."  
*-The New York Times*
- "The most successful of the voluntary scavenger emancipation enterprises has been the Sulabh Shauchalaya Sansthan, which has started something of a mini-Revolution in Indian sanitation planning by using entrepreneurial business practices, modern technology and aggressive marketing methods."  
*-The Washington Post*
- Followers of Gandhi help "Untouchability of the untouchables".  
*-Frankfurter Allgemeine*
- "A Brahmin has associated himself with menial work, which shows that there is a Revolution in the making."  
*-Frankfurter*
- "Dr. Pathak has made it his aim in life to free scavengers from drudgery."  
*-Globe and Mail*
- "Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak is a great Redeemer."  
*-The Hindustan Times*
- "Dr. Pathak won't find relief until his countrymen all do loo - in private."  
*-Far - Eastern Economic Review*
- Living Proof of what Vision can Accomplish !  
*-Mr. Piers Cross  
Water and Sanitation Program*
- Congratulations for Sulabh achievements. May God bless your work and may we find more ways to work together.  
*-Mr. Terrence Thompson  
WHO/SEARO*
- So, we will continue and intensity the co-operation between the Sulabh's of the World!  
*-Dr. Jan P. Pronk  
Chairman, Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council*
- The visit has been most useful to me for it is the research in small things that changes a community to do great things in this country.  
*-Dr Raja Rammana  
MP, Rajya Sabha*



## Sulabh International Social Service Organisation

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