

Swachh Bharat Abhiyan in a rural institute

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When I came back to Phaltan from USA in September 1981 and joined the Nimbkar Agricultural Research Institute (NARI) as Director, the first thing I noticed at NARI was filthy bathrooms. Luckily the Institute trustees had thoughtfully told the architect to put the toilet facilities a little distance away from the main building. Otherwise with filthy and smelly bathrooms inside the buildings and very close to the offices it is difficult to sit in your rooms.

I have a fetish for clean bathrooms – a trait that I acquired when I was studying in the U.S. In early stages of my education at the University of Florida (UF) I used to live in a dorm called Reid Coop. This dorm was the cheapest on-campus housing facility and was generally populated by foreign students. One of the reasons it was cheap was because there were no janitorial services. All the students staying there were assigned the task of cleaning the hallways, common kitchen and common bathrooms.

Initially I revolted against the whole idea of cleaning a common bathroom, but once the inevitability of the event sank in then took it as a challenge to clean it thoroughly. I was not competing with anybody or trying to show off, but developed a '*junoon*' to see how clean I could make the bathrooms. Besides this was also an excellent physical exercise since it was quite taxing to clean the bathrooms and hallways.

I continued this exercise even when I and my wife Nandini moved into married student housing in UF. Bathroom and house cleaning of our apartment was my task!

So when I came back from the US and saw the filthy bathrooms at the institute I decided to take matters into my hands. Phaltan in 1981 was a small rural town and

our Institute was around 7 kms from it. So in those days no person would come so far to clean the bathrooms or toilets. The Institute building was inaugurated in 1980 and it seemed since then the bathrooms had never been cleaned.

I circulated a small notice informing the staff that we will all take turns to clean the toilets. Immediately there was a revolt and the 20-25 odd staff members said that they were scientists and not sweepers! This type of behavior in the land of Gandhiji was quite strange! So this was my first real interaction with the NARI staff.

I told them that as a Director I will clean it and so they should do likewise but they did not budge.

So I sent a second circular telling them that only those staff members who will clean the toilets will use it and the toilet key will only be shared with them. Rest can go to the fields. Only four staff members agreed to clean them. So I first showed them how to clean the toilets and only five of us used the toilet for almost two years before we could get somebody to come from the town and clean them regularly. For two years rest of the staff did not mind going into the fields. Naturally during those two years the toilets were spick and span!

However an unintended outcome of this episode was that the word spread very fast that this new crazy Director asks his employees to clean the bathroom. So people stopped applying for jobs!

I am delighted that the present prime minister has started the *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* but I guess more than constructing toilets it is the mindset which needs to be changed before we can become a *Swachh* and hygienic nation. We have this attitude of sahibs and we always think that this type of work is below our dignity. Unless and until that changes we will remain a caste-ridden society.

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