

# Modi's tribute to the Mahatma



By Meenakshi Lekhi | Issue Date: October 12, 2019 | Updated: October 12, 2019 16:53 IST

The essence of Gandhian thought lies in the execution of the ideas propounded by Mahatma Gandhi. Cleanliness and sanitation are ideas that reflect the essential beauty of Gandhian values and, hence, the honest implementation of these are a test of one's commitment to such values.

In our scriptures, cleanliness is equated with godliness. Yamas (moral principles) and niyamas (rules) are the first two of the eight steps of Ashtanga yoga described in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali; shauch (cleanliness) is the first niyama for a yogi.



Imaging: Bhaskaran

In Islam, too, much emphasis has been placed on cleanliness that is not only restricted to ritual ablutions, such as wudu and ghusi performed during prayers, but also on toilet etiquettes and environmental hygiene. In Christianity, the Old Testament, particularly the Book of Leviticus, serves many instructions on personal and collective hygiene.

Hence, our religions collectively mandate cleanliness for the faithful and emphasises that an unclean man is not able to stand before God. In this background, the emphasis of Mahatma Gandhi on cleanliness and sanitation becomes important.

On many occasions, Gandhi ji said that cleanliness and sanitation were more important in India than independence. Gandhi ji, when he was still a practicing lawyer in South Africa, had come to attend the annual Congress session for the first time in 1901 in Calcutta. There, he was appalled to see the sanitary condition in the camp where people openly defecated in the veranda and in open spaces outside their rooms. When he contacted the volunteers, they said it was the job of the Bhangis to clean up the area, not theirs. Gandhi ji, still in his western attire, arranged for brooms and started sweeping the filth leaving everyone gaping in awe—though no one came to join him.

Unfortunately, after the death of Gandhi ji, that spirit of cleanliness which he tried to instil so laboriously in the Congress, had vanished from its grain and the successive governments that came to rule after independence only paid lip service to the cause of public sanitation. Thus, it was important to reconstruct the broken chain of Gandhian efforts to make cleanliness and sanitation a mass movement again.

In this context, the efforts of our prime minister, who began Swachh Bharat Abhiyan on October 2, 2014, with the idea to make cleanliness a mass movement, becomes important. The fact that within the five years of launch of the mission the government constructed 10 crore toilets covering around 60 crore of Indian population, along with increasing sanitation coverage to 98 per cent of the rural areas, is a living testimony to the fact that Prime Minister Modi meant it in words and action.

By adopting and implementing Gandhian ideas, the prime minister does not intend to claim ownership of Mahatma's legacy or to use it for promoting his narrow political interests, as the successive governments had been doing so far, rather with this, he intends to inculcate the true spirit of Gandhism into the collective psyche of the nation for the gradual betterment of society.

**Lekhi is member of Parliament • [forthwriteml@gmail.com](mailto:forthwriteml@gmail.com)**