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Communicating Swachhata, Changing Behaviour

The Social and Behaviour Change Communication Journey of the Swachh Bharat Mission

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*Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) placed behaviour change at the centre of sanitation, moving beyond infrastructure towards sustained practices and social norms. **Social and Behaviour Change Communication (SBCC)** transformed communication from information dissemination into dialogue, participation, and collective action. **Mahatma Gandhi** and his ideals of cleanliness and **self-service** became the guiding principles of SBM. Community institutions and grassroots actors, like **Swachhagrahis**, helped turn individual sanitation practices into shared community norms. **Multiple communication channels** reinforced Swachhata messages across households, communities, public spaces and digital platforms. Women and children became both beneficiaries and **active agents** in spreading and sustaining sanitation behaviours. Reinforcement, recognition, incentives and participatory monitoring helped move Swachhata from a campaign activity to sustained community behaviour.*

The Behavioural Foundations of Swachh Bharat

The **Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM)** has treated sanitation as a matter of **behaviour, participation** and **collective responsibility**. The Mission recognised that infrastructure alone could not create sustained sanitation outcomes. SBM therefore placed **behaviour change communication** at the centre of its implementation approach. Under SBM-G, the focus is not limited to toilet construction. It encourages communities to adopt safe and sustainable sanitation practices. Similarly, under SBM-U, the focus is not only on waste processing. It focusses on making waste segregation at source a public habit and achieving total urban sanitation and public cleanliness. **Information, Education, Communication (IEC) strategies, behaviour reinforcement, and monitoring** are therefore integral to the SBM implementation strategy. SBM has evolved from building sanitation assets towards sustaining sanitation behaviour. This evolution places **Social and Behaviour Change Communication (SBCC)** at the centre.

Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM)

Launched on 2 October 2014, SBM became one of **India's largest government-led sanitation movements**. The Mission operates through two components: **SBM-Grameen** and **SBM-Urban**. SBM-G focuses on rural sanitation, toilet access, usage, and waste management. SBM-U focuses on urban sanitation, waste management, and clean public spaces. For details on achievements of SBM, please also read [here](#).

From Information to Behaviour Change

Social and Behaviour Change Communication (SBCC) uses communication to support positive social change. It combines several approaches to influence knowledge, attitudes, norms and practices. These include **interpersonal communication**, **community mobilisation** and **mass media**. It also includes **social media**, **entertainment**, **advocacy** and **strategic partnerships**.

SBCC under SBM goes beyond simply disseminating information. It seeks to influence attitudes, social norms and everyday practices. This approach under SBM combines **interpersonal communication**, **community mobilisation**, **awareness generation** and **collective action**. Its long-term objective is to change social norms around open defecation and waste management. It recognises that people's behaviour is influenced by their social environment. Families, neighbours, community groups, local institutions and trusted leaders can reinforce or discourage particular practices. **Communication, therefore, works through relationships and collective participation.**

Mahatma Gandhi: A Moral Anchor for SBCC under SBM

Mahatma Gandhi's emphasis on cleanliness and sanitation provided a powerful foundation for the SBM's communication strategy. The Mission was launched on 2 October 2014 to achieve a Swachh Bharat by **Gandhi's 150th birth anniversary in 2019**. The **logo** of SBM represents the spectacles of Mahatma Gandhi. It has helped in creating the **brand value** and representing the emotion for cleanliness worldwide. It has also helped the masses associate themselves easily and quickly with the mission. **Consequently, rural India was declared ODF on 2 October 2019.**

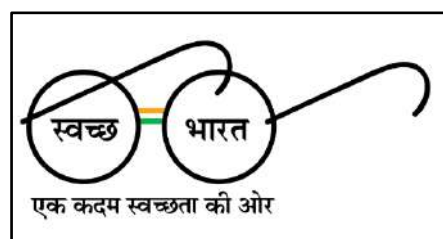


Image 1: The logo of SBM

Mahatma Gandhi had started his campaign for cleanliness from Champaran during the Satyagraha movement. His vision of an ideal village was one with perfect sanitation, village lanes and streets free of all avoidable dust. In his book **"Ashram Observances in Action"**, Gandhi writes that **sanitary service is an essential and sacred service**. His **Sevagram Ashram** laid emphasis on engaging no outside labour for this work. The members themselves attended in turns to clean the premises. The Ashram rules also laid down that it was necessary that inmates wash their hands and wipe them with a clean napkin. **SBM's messaging drew on this legacy** to build public ownership and encourage participation in behaviour change.

This connection also shaped the language and symbolism of the behaviour change movement. The term **'Swachhagrahi'** consciously drew from Gandhi's tradition of **Satyagraha**, recasting citizens and sanitation volunteers as participants in a collective **Swachhagraha**. SBM, therefore, revered Mahatma Gandhi not merely as a commemorative figure, but as a **communication anchor** for linking cleanliness with collective action, citizenship and sustained behavioural change.

Taking Behaviour Change to the Doorsteps: Changing Individual Habits

SBM translated SBCC principles into direct, community-level engagement. **Interpersonal Communication (IPC)** became an important pathway for influencing sanitation practices. Unlike one-way messaging, IPC enables **dialogue between communicators and community members**. It allows concerns, perceptions, and practical barriers to be discussed within **local contexts**. The government relied on frontline workers, Swachhagrahis, community leaders, self-help groups (SHGs), and existing social networks for **facilitating IPC**.

The **methods** included home visits, face-to-face counselling, small-group sessions, peer communication and discussions at homes, health centres, community settings and religious gatherings.

Swachhagrahis became grassroots foot soldiers and motivators under **SBM-G**. Their role extended beyond promoting toilet construction. They helped families adopt and sustain safe sanitation behaviours. Swachhagrahis facilitated **community nudging** and **triggering**, household visits, and sanitation discussions. They also supported community mobilisation and strengthened **Nigrani Samitis**. Their engagement continued even after ODF declaration to further reinforce sanitation practices among individuals and families.



Image 2: A meeting of Swachhagrahis and SHG didis in Bihar



Image 3: Nigrani Samiti using interpersonal communication to spread the message of

Interpersonal communication also extended into **community-led vigilance** through **Nigrani Samitis**. These committees were strengthened to support ODF achievement and sustainability. Their activities included **regular morning and evening monitoring** within villages. Nigrani activities focused particularly on **common open defecation spots**. They reinforced sanitation messages through continued community presence and follow-up. Regular Nigrani drives, village meetings, and **Ratri Chaupals** helped sustain ODF behaviour. Swachhagrahis were provided with a **toolkit** that included a **torch and whistle** to support their field-level vigilance during community monitoring.

The approach therefore moved sanitation from an individual practice towards a shared community norm.

The community itself became an active participant in reinforcing and sustaining behaviour change.

From Individual Conversations to Collective Action

Interpersonal communication created opportunities for dialogue at the household and community level. Community mobilisation took this process further by bringing people together to discuss shared sanitation concerns and identify collective solutions. Under SBM, it provided platforms for communities to participate in decisions affecting their everyday sanitation practices. **Gram Sabhas, chaupals, community meetings** and other local forums enabled dialogue on sanitation issues and helped communities build consensus around common priorities.

Community mobilisation also brought different groups into the sanitation conversation. **Community leaders, Panchayati Raj Institutions, volunteers, religious leaders and women's groups** could facilitate local discussions and events. This approach connected individual behaviour with collective responsibility. A household adopting safe sanitation practices became part of a wider community effort. **Community discussions** created opportunities to identify local concerns, exchange experiences, and build agreement around desired practices. This approach was also reflected through campaigns such as **Chalo Champaran, Swachh Shakti, Swachh Sundar Sauchalaya, Swachhata Hi Seva, Swachh Sundar Samudayik Sauchalaya, Swachh Bharat Diwas, Swachhata Mahotsav and Swachhata Pakhwada**. These campaigns provided platforms for collective participation around sanitation and cleanliness.

Community mobilisation was further reinforced through **mid-media and outdoor communication**. These channels carried sanitation messages beyond individual conversations and into spaces where communities routinely gathered. **Puppet shows, magic shows, drama and street theatre (nukkad natak)** are some of the examples of local and traditional mid-media formats. Outdoor media uses public spaces such as **billboards and wall paintings on authorised public walls** to communicate sanitation messages. Wall paintings and **graffiti art** have been used especially to communicate Swachhata messages while reflecting local identity and supporting city beautification. The importance of such formats lies not only in message visibility, but also in how they place Swachhata within the everyday social environment. A sanitation message encountered during a community event, street performance, or public gathering can reinforce conversations taking place within households and local groups.



Image 2: A wall painting in Assam spreading swachhata messages in local language

A major area of focus under SBM-U has been the **leveraging of digital tools** for maximizing citizen outreach. For example, **Google Maps** was used to upload of more than **67,000 public toilet blocks** across more than **3,300 cities**. This has made sanitation facilities more easily accessible to all categories of citizens. The **Swachhata App** has provided a one-stop digital platform for grievance redressal for citizens to register their complaints about any aspect of cleanliness.



Image 3: Swachhata App available for both Android and iOS users

Mass media provided another layer of reinforcement. These included **television, radio, print, and online media** channels. Community radio carried discussions, testimonials, stories, and public service announcements related to swachhata. **Social media platforms** such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram proved instrumental in disseminating key messages and building virtual networks and communities. **Mobile telephone services** supported awareness through bulk SMS, WhatsApp, and podcasts.



Image 4: A social media post regarding SHS 2026 campaign

Swachh Talks provides an example of digital engagement within SBM-U. It is a **peer-learning webinar series** for sharing field experiences and best practices related to Swachhata. Such platforms extend the conversation beyond conventional sanitation to issues like plastic waste management and promotion of the circular economy.

The movement from IPC to community mobilisation represents a shift in the **unit of behaviour change**. This progression is important to the SBCC approach under SBM. Communication does not end when a message reaches an individual. It gains greater significance when people discuss it, adapt it to their local context, and participate in collective action. In this process, **participation itself becomes a form of communication**.



Celebrity Endorsements and Popular Culture as Vehicles for SBCC

Swachh Bharat also used the reach of celebrities to strengthen its SBCC efforts. In 2016, **Amitabh Bachchan** and **Sachin Tendulkar** featured in national audio-visual campaigns for SBM-G. These campaigns were designed to make communication more people-centric and support behaviour change and citizen engagement. Both of them also **participated in Swachh Bharat events** to encourage grassroots workers and sanitation champions. **Amitabh Bachchan** subsequently led the '**Darwaza Band**' campaign in 2017. The campaign **promoted toilet use** among people who had toilets but continued to practise open defecation. It also featured **Anushka Sharma**, who **encouraged women to take leadership** in addressing sanitation within their villages. The campaign used mass media to complement grassroots IEC and interpersonal communication by Swachhagrahis.

Cinema also became a vehicle for addressing sanitation-related social norms. '**Toilet – Ek Prem Katha**', featuring **Akshay Kumar** and **Bhumi Pednekar**, brought sanitation and toilet use into mainstream popular culture. In 2018, **Akshay Kumar** and **Bhumi Pednekar** featured in an SBM-G campaign promoting **twin-pit**



Image 5: Celebrity Endorsements to promote toilet usage

toilet technology. The film was also made available for **non-commercial screenings in villages** by state and district SBM-G teams. The campaign further used celebrity influence to address the stigma around emptying toilet pits and encourage sustained toilet use. **Vidya Balan** featured in a video propagating the slogan “*jaha soch, vaha shauchalaya*”. It stressed upon the health benefits of using toilets. It also encouraged women-led toilet-building initiatives in rural households. Thus, popular media served as an additional layer of SBCC, taking sanitation messages from government campaigns into television, cinema and public discourse.

Women and Children: Shaping and Experiencing Swachhata

Sanitation can transform everyday experiences while creating new spaces for participation. For women, ***Suraksha, Suvidha and Swabhimaan*** capture three important dimensions of this change. Safety, convenience, and self-respect connect sanitation with women’s everyday lives. The impact is reflected in women’s reported experiences. A study conducted in collaboration with the Ministry of Jal Shakti found that **93 percent of women no longer feared being hurt by someone or harmed by animals while defecating**. 91 percent reported **saving up to an hour** and avoiding travel of up to a kilometre. 93 percent also reported **no longer restricting food or water intake** to manage sanitation needs.

Interestingly, in **Bihar**, people have started calling toilets ‘**Izzatghars**’, signifying their connection with the dignity of women. Construction of toilets has, thus, helped address a significant social imbalance. It is becoming a reason for economic and social empowerment. Women have contributed to sanitation as **community actors**. Women’s groups and SHGs form part of the community networks through which sanitation communication can take place. This **connects sanitation communication with existing community institutions** and networks.

Children provide another important link between sanitation communication and everyday behaviour.

Schools can become spaces where sanitation practices are discussed, demonstrated and reinforced. The SBM identifies students as participants and **agents of change**. SBM has focused on **school-based approaches** including curriculum integration, awareness campaigns, Shramdaan, mobile-van education and visits to waste-management facilities. Communication has also reached children through



Image 6: Schools educating children about Swachhata

formats that combine learning with participation and entertainment. These include **educational videos, flipcharts** and other materials for small-group engagement. It also recognises local and traditional formats such as puppet shows, magic shows, drama and street theatre for communicating sanitation messages.

Together, women and children illustrate the two-way nature of sanitation behaviour change. **They experience the benefits of improved Swachhata while also contributing to its spread through families, schools and communities.** Women’s groups may strengthen community networks, while children may carry sanitation messages into households and everyday interactions. Swachhata therefore becomes not only a matter of infrastructure or individual practice, but a shared community behaviour sustained across generations.

Reinforcing Desired Swachhata Behaviour through Awards & Recognitions

Sustaining Swachhata requires reinforcement beyond initial awareness and mobilisation. The SBM approach

combines certification, recognition, nudges, and community incentives. These mechanisms help sustain participation and encourage continued adoption of desired sanitation practices.

Certification protocols awarded to cities and villages provide measurable standards for sanitation and cleanliness outcomes. Under SBM, **ODF**, **ODF+**, **ODF++**, **Water+**, and **Star Rating protocols** helped standardise these outcomes with citizen participation. The **ODF protocol** focuses on ensuring access to toilets for all citizens. **ODF+** extends this focus to functional and usable Community and Public Toilets. Their proper operation and maintenance support continued toilet use and help prevent slippage to open defecation. **ODF++** addresses the safe containment, evacuation, transportation, and processing of faecal sludge. It seeks to prevent untreated sludge from entering open drains, water bodies or fields. **Water+** extends the focus to untreated black and grey water. It also promotes reuse of a portion of treated wastewater. For solid waste management, the **Star Rating Protocol for Garbage Free Cities** provides a single metric for assessing a city's waste management status. Its parameters include door-to-door collection and source segregation. They also cover scientific processing of waste and remediation of legacy dumpsites. Together, these protocols create benchmarks against which Swachhata outcomes can be assessed.



Recognition can reinforce participation by making positive behaviour visible within the community. SBM rewards and felicitates **best-performing workers, peer leaders and local champions** through **peer recognition** and **appreciation letters** from the government. Recognition can also create aspirational examples for others to emulate. The approach therefore connects individual contribution with collective identity and community participation.

Incentives can also be designed around specific local sanitation and waste management challenges. The **Swachhata Chronicles** documents an example from Panchayat Halqa Hiller in Jammu and Kashmir. The initiative introduced “**Give Polythene Get Gold**” to encourage communities to collect plastic waste. Youth and women supported the campaign, which aimed to make local areas free from polythene waste. Two gold coins were offered against specified quantities of collected plastic waste. The initiative combined awareness, community participation, and an incentive to encourage action. The campaign also included cloth bags for households and community shramdaan drives.



Image 7: A winner of "Give Polythene Get Gold" campaign

Thus, reinforcement under Swachhata operates at multiple levels. Protocols establish standards, nudges encourage desired actions, recognition celebrates sustained participation, and community incentives can stimulate local ownership. These mechanisms help shift Swachhata from a campaign-driven activity towards a sustained behavioural practice.

Behaviour Monitoring for Maintaining Swachhata

Sustaining Swachhata requires mechanisms that can assess progress and identify areas needing further action. Monitoring, therefore, extends beyond measuring infrastructure. It also creates opportunities for citizen participation, local assessment, and continuous improvement.

Swachh Survekshan has emerged as the **world's largest urban sanitation survey**. It **evaluates cities and states across sanitation and cleanliness** parameters. The survey has also evolved into an important governance tool under SBM-U. Swachh Survekshan acts as a catalyst by **encouraging healthy competition** among cities and States. This creates an incentive for local administrations to improve their sanitation performance. Citizen participation has also expanded significantly through the survey. Around **one lakh citizens provided feedback** during its first round in 2016. This increased to nearly **five crore citizens** during the sixth round in 2021. The survey therefore provides more than an assessment of sanitation outcomes. It creates a structured interface between citizens, local governments and sanitation systems.

At the community level, monitoring also supports the sustainability of behavioural change. SBM-G guidelines provide for continued engagement by **Nigrani Samitis, community leaders and Panchayat representatives** after ODF declaration.

The Continuing Journey of Swachhata

The journey of the **Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM)** reflects a progressive evolution in both sanitation practices and communication approaches. The initial emphasis was on creating awareness and generating demand for household toilets, followed by efforts to encourage their regular use and eliminate open defecation. As these gains were consolidated, the focus expanded towards sustaining **ODF status** and strengthening the management of solid and liquid waste. Communication evolved alongside these priorities, moving from awareness generation to deeper engagement and collective participation.

Collectively, these experiences reflect a consistent trajectory, from **information to engagement, from engagement to participation, and from participation to sustained community ownership**. Under SBM, communication has consequently become an integral part of the sanitation ecosystem, connecting people with infrastructure, institutions, and collective action. The larger objective is not merely to communicate the message of **Swachhata**, but to **nurture it as a sustained practice embedded in everyday community life**.

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