



Research Paper

## Cleanliness and Social Reform: Insights from Ancient Indian Texts and Modern Thinkers

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### Abstract

Sanitation is an essential component of human well-being and social justice, playing a pivotal role in shaping the health and dignity of communities. Across diverse cultures and historical epochs, thinkers have highlighted the profound link between cleanliness and societal development. This paper examines the role of community sanitation as a fundamental aspect of social reform, drawing on insights from both Indian and global social thinkers. By analysing the philosophies of figures such as Mahatma Gandhi, B.R. Ambedkar, and Vinoba Bhave, alongside international figures like Nelson Mandela and Florence Nightingale, the paper explores how sanitation transcends its functional necessity to become a key instrument of social equity.

Central to this discussion is the role of social workers as agents of change in promoting sanitation as part of a larger vision of social reform. Social workers have historically been at the forefront of advocating for clean and healthy living environments, particularly for marginalized communities. This paper argues that sanitation efforts must be understood within the broader framework of human rights, with a special emphasis on addressing issues of caste, poverty, and inequality in India. It also emphasizes the philosophical foundations provided by the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), where ancient texts such as the Sushruta Samhita and Manu Smriti offer valuable guidance on the importance of hygiene and public health.

By engaging with these perspectives, this research illuminates how community sanitation is integral to the creation of inclusive societies. It underscores the need for a multi-faceted approach that involves public policy, social activism, and grassroots engagement to foster sustainable sanitation practices.

**Keywords:** Role of social workers, social reform, community sanitation, Indian Knowledge System, health equity, public health, sanitation justice, marginalized communities.

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### I. Introduction

Sanitation is not just a matter of public health but a fundamental aspect of human dignity, social justice, and environmental sustainability. The integration of sanitation into social, political, and economic frameworks has been the focus of many global and national thinkers. From Mahatma Gandhi's emphasis on personal cleanliness as a gateway to moral purity, to Nelson Mandela's recognition of sanitation as a basic human right, the discourse on sanitation has evolved to reflect its critical role in the development of equitable, healthy societies. In both the Indian and global contexts, sanitation encompasses more than just physical cleanliness; it represents the harmonious functioning of communities, the protection of vulnerable populations, and the upliftment of marginalized groups. This paper explores the integrated approach to sanitation by examining historical and contemporary perspectives, drawing insights from both Indian knowledge systems and global thought leaders.

### Sanitation in Indian Knowledge System and Indian Thinkers

Sanitation, a critical aspect of public health, is deeply embedded in the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) and has been emphasized by Indian thinkers throughout history. From ancient scriptures to modern

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reformers, sanitation has been considered not just as a health necessity but also as a moral and spiritual duty. The Indian worldview perceives cleanliness as a key to both physical well-being and mental clarity, and this has been echoed in the philosophies of Indian thinkers like Mahatma Gandhi, Swami Vivekananda, and B.R. Ambedkar, among others.

Mahatma Gandhi, one of India's foremost social reformers, placed great emphasis on sanitation, famously asserting that "*Sanitation is more important than independence*" (Gandhi, 1937). This statement, delivered at Bhangi Colony, highlights Gandhi's belief that personal and communal cleanliness should be prioritized even over political freedom. His advocacy for sanitation extended beyond mere physical cleanliness; it was a call to eliminate social inequalities and the inhuman conditions under which sanitation workers—often from marginalized communities—lived and worked. For Gandhi, sanitation was directly linked to dignity and respect for all individuals. He famously connected personal cleanliness to moral purity, stating that "*If we keep our backyards clean, our hearts will follow suit*" (Gandhi, 1925). This metaphorical connection between external cleanliness and inner purity was an integral part of his vision of a reformed, independent India.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a key architect of the Indian Constitution and a leader of the Dalit movement, also viewed sanitation through a socio-political lens. He argued that "*The problem of the sanitation worker is a reflection of the caste system's discriminatory practices*" (Ambedkar, 1967). Ambedkar's critique focused on the structural inequalities inherent in the caste system, where Dalits were relegated to the degrading profession of manual scavenging. For Ambedkar, true social reform could only occur if sanitation workers were freed from the shackles of caste-based discrimination. His writings expose how the lack of sanitation facilities for lower-caste communities is not just a public health issue but a deeply entrenched socio-economic injustice that must be addressed through constitutional and legal reforms.

Vinoba Bhave, a close associate of Gandhi and a leader of the Sarvodaya movement, extended Gandhi's ideas on sanitation by emphasizing collective responsibility. Bhave stated that "*Cleaning up the environment should be everyone's business and not just of the sanitation workers*" (Bhave, 1959). This statement reflects his belief in the shared responsibility of all citizens in maintaining cleanliness, which ties into the broader Gandhian concept of self-reliance and self-governance. For Bhave, sanitation was a community effort that transcended individual responsibility, calling for a collective consciousness toward the environment. Bhave's Sarvodaya movement sought to eliminate the hierarchical division of labour and advocated for a classless society where even tasks like cleaning were distributed equally among all members of the community.

Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel laureate and visionary, connected sanitation with rural development and national identity. He argued that "*The soul of India lives in her villages, and it is in these places that real sanitation reform must take place*" (Tagore, 1932). Tagore recognized the crucial role that rural sanitation plays in the overall health and prosperity of the nation. In his educational experiments at Shantiniketan, Tagore emphasized practical learning, including the importance of hygiene and cleanliness in rural settings. His approach to sanitation was holistic, merging it with education and rural upliftment, suggesting that national progress could only be achieved through the development of the villages, which formed the backbone of India's social and economic life.

Deen Dayal Upadhyay, a proponent of Integral Humanism, also stressed the importance of sanitation for social upliftment. He argued that "*The upliftment of the marginalized must begin with proper sanitation and clean environments for all*" (Upadhyay, 1965). Like Gandhi and Ambedkar, Upadhyay saw sanitation as more than just a health concern; it was a fundamental aspect of social reform. By ensuring access to clean water, hygienic living conditions, and proper sanitation facilities, society could begin to address the deeper issues of inequality and marginalization. Upadhyay's Integral Humanism emphasized the need for a balanced approach to development, one that included both material and spiritual progress, with sanitation forming a key component of this vision.

The emphasis on sanitation is not a modern phenomenon in India. Ancient texts such as the *Sushruta Samhita* and *Charaka Samhita*, foundational texts in Ayurveda, highlight the importance of cleanliness for physical health. Sushruta, regarded as the father of surgery, stated that "*Without cleanliness, the benefits of health cannot be fully realized. Cleanliness of the body and environment is necessary for the well-being of the society*" (Sushruta, n.d.). His statement underscores the belief that personal hygiene and environmental cleanliness are essential for preventing disease and maintaining health. Similarly, Charaka, another key figure in Ayurveda, asserted that "*Clean water, fresh air, and hygienic surroundings are the foundations of good health*" (Charaka, n.d.). These ancient physicians recognized the link between environmental conditions and health outcomes, foreshadowing modern public health principles.

Kautilya (Chanakya), the ancient Indian philosopher and author of the *Arthashastra*, understood the economic and political importance of sanitation. He wrote that "*A city's prosperity depends on its cleanliness and its people's health*" (Kautilya, n.d.). Kautilya's statement suggests that the prosperity of a nation is directly tied to the health of its citizens, which in turn depends on maintaining a clean and sanitary environment. His writings highlight the importance of cleanliness in urban planning and governance, a concept that is still relevant today in the context of modern cities and public health.

Ancient Indian texts, including the *Vedas* and *Smritis*, also emphasize the importance of cleanliness as a moral and spiritual obligation. The *Rigveda* states that “*Water is purifying; let it flow and cleanse the impure*” (Rigveda, n.d.), while the *Manu Smriti* asserts that “*Cleanliness is a part of righteousness and is indispensable for human growth*” (Manu Smriti, n.d.). These texts reflect the deeply ingrained belief in the purifying and life-sustaining qualities of water and cleanliness, concepts that are integral to Indian cultural and religious practices. The *Atharva Veda* goes further, stating that “*A clean body is a home to purity and good health; it leads to clarity of mind*” (Atharva Veda, n.d.), thereby linking cleanliness to mental well-being.

In the *Mahabharata*, the epic states that “*Where there is cleanliness, there is health, and where there is health, there is prosperity*” (Mahabharata, n.d.). This ancient wisdom aligns with modern public health theories, which recognize that the health of a population is directly tied to its environmental conditions. Similarly, the Tamil scripture *Tirukkural* observes that “*If cleanliness disappears, respect for life diminishes and diseases multiply*” (Tirukkural, n.d.). This statement anticipates the catastrophic consequences of neglecting sanitation, which has been proven true in contemporary times during outbreaks of diseases caused by poor hygiene and sanitation.

Overall, sanitation in the Indian Knowledge System and among Indian thinkers has been treated as a foundational principle for the well-being of individuals and society. Whether in ancient texts or in the reformist ideas of modern thinkers, sanitation is consistently framed as a moral, social, and political issue, one that requires collective responsibility and reform. Thinkers like Gandhi, Ambedkar, Bhave, and Tagore, along with ancient Indian physicians and philosophers, have offered a comprehensive vision of sanitation that is deeply intertwined with social justice, community well-being, and national progress.

### **Global Perspective of Sanitation**

Sanitation is a universal issue that transcends geographical, cultural, and political boundaries. Throughout history, global thinkers and leaders have recognized the critical importance of cleanliness in fostering public health, social harmony, and human dignity. This section examines the perspectives of international figures such as Nelson Mandela, Florence Nightingale, and Martin Luther King Jr., who have emphasized the role of sanitation in promoting equality, public health, and social justice.

Nelson Mandela, a global icon for human rights and freedom, asserted that “*Sanitation should not be a privilege. It is a fundamental human right*” (Mandela, 1994). His statement underscores the moral imperative of ensuring access to sanitation for all, particularly in post-apartheid South Africa, where economic inequalities had left many without basic services. For Mandela, sanitation was not merely a public health issue but a matter of human rights, reflecting his broader fight for equality and social justice. By framing sanitation as a right, Mandela called attention to the systemic inequalities that deprive marginalized communities of basic necessities. His vision aligns with global movements advocating for universal access to water and sanitation, emphasizing that without these basic services, social progress is stunted.

Florence Nightingale, a pioneer in modern nursing, was one of the first to make a direct connection between cleanliness and healthcare. She famously stated that “*The first requirement in a hospital is that it should do the sick no harm, which starts with cleanliness*” (Nightingale, 1859). In her foundational work *Notes on Nursing*, Nightingale stressed that proper sanitation and cleanliness are essential to prevent infections and promote recovery. Her insights into hospital hygiene revolutionized healthcare practices worldwide, laying the foundation for modern public health initiatives that prioritize cleanliness in medical settings. Nightingale’s work highlights how sanitation is not just a matter of personal hygiene but a critical element in protecting the health of entire communities.

Similarly, Eleanor Roosevelt, an advocate for human rights and the welfare of vulnerable populations, emphasized the societal importance of sanitation. She declared that “*Sanitation is the foundation of public health. Without it, society crumbles*” (Roosevelt, 1957). Roosevelt’s statement reflects a broader understanding of sanitation as a cornerstone of societal well-being. Her work at the United Nations Health Forum highlighted the global need for improved sanitation, particularly in developing nations where poor sanitary conditions lead to the spread of diseases. Roosevelt’s views resonate with contemporary global health organizations like the World Health Organization, which have consistently prioritized sanitation in their efforts to combat public health crises.

The connection between labour dignity and sanitation was powerfully articulated by Martin Luther King Jr., who championed the rights of sanitation workers during the Memphis Sanitation Strike in 1968. King stated, “*All labour has dignity, even that of sanitation workers, and it is essential for our survival*” (King, 1968). His support for sanitation workers was not only a call for fair wages and better working conditions but also an acknowledgment of the indispensable role that sanitation plays in maintaining public health and societal functioning. King’s broader civil rights movement sought to elevate the status of all forms of labour, emphasizing that those who work in sanitation are essential to the well-being of society and should be treated with respect and dignity.

Albert Einstein's contribution to the discourse on sanitation comes from his philosophical reflections on society and human dignity. He remarked that "*The sanitation of society lies in the hands of those who respect the dignity of all labour*" (Einstein, 1934). Einstein's words echo the sentiments of King, highlighting that societal cleanliness and order depend on respecting the value of all forms of work, including sanitation. His perspective connects sanitation to broader ethical questions about labour and social justice, emphasizing that the health of a society is deeply linked to the way it treats its workers, especially those in essential yet often overlooked sectors like sanitation.

Margaret Mead, a cultural anthropologist, emphasized the power of small actions in creating large-scale social change. She observed that "*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world by starting with small actions like cleaning their surroundings*" (Mead, 1969). Mead's statement speaks to the grassroots nature of social reform and highlights the transformative potential of local actions. Her focus on collective responsibility aligns with the views of other global thinkers who emphasize that sanitation and cleanliness are communal duties, requiring the active participation of citizens. Mead's perspective is particularly relevant in contemporary environmental movements, where local actions, such as waste management and recycling, play a vital role in addressing global sanitation challenges.

Mother Teresa, a symbol of compassion and service, viewed cleanliness as both a physical and spiritual necessity. She believed that "*Cleanliness is the sign of a pure heart*" (Mother Teresa, 1989). This statement reflects her deep spiritual understanding of cleanliness, which she saw as integral to personal morality and care for others. For Mother Teresa, cleanliness was a reflection of inner purity and a way to serve the less fortunate, aligning with her lifelong mission of caring for the sick and destitute. Her work with the poor in Kolkata demonstrated the importance of sanitation in improving the lives of the most vulnerable, offering a moral framework for understanding the role of cleanliness in social care.

The ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu also recognized the importance of cleanliness for maintaining balance and harmony. He wrote, "*Cleanliness brings harmony to both body and mind*" (Lao Tzu, 4th Century BCE). This reflection, found in the *Tao Te Ching*, emphasizes the holistic approach to health that is central to Taoist philosophy. Lao Tzu's words suggest that cleanliness is not only about physical health but also about mental and emotional well-being. His ideas contribute to a global understanding of sanitation that integrates personal hygiene with inner peace and harmony, an approach that continues to influence wellness practices around the world.

Confucius, another influential Chinese philosopher, also linked cleanliness with social order, stating that "*The cleanliness of the people reflects the harmony of the state*" (Confucius, n.d.). For Confucius, personal cleanliness was a reflection of one's commitment to the greater good of society. His teachings suggest that a clean and orderly society is one where individuals take responsibility for their surroundings, contributing to the overall harmony of the state. Confucius' ideas reinforce the notion that sanitation is not merely an individual concern but a collective responsibility that reflects the moral and social fabric of a community.

Thomas Jefferson, a founding father of the United States, recognized the importance of sanitation in the context of liberty and governance. He wrote that "*Without sanitation, liberty becomes a fleeting thing, for health is essential to the functioning of a free society*" (Jefferson, 1806). Jefferson's statement links public health to the very foundations of democracy, suggesting that a healthy population is crucial for the functioning of a free and prosperous nation. His views highlight the interconnectedness of public health, sanitation, and civic life, a perspective that is increasingly relevant in contemporary discussions on the role of government in ensuring access to clean water, sanitation, and healthcare.

In conclusion, the global perspective on sanitation, as articulated by these international thinkers, emphasizes the importance of cleanliness in fostering social justice, public health, and human dignity. From Nelson Mandela's call for sanitation as a human right to Florence Nightingale's foundational work in hospital hygiene, the global discourse on sanitation transcends health and enters the realms of ethics, labour rights, and social equity. These thinkers collectively argue that sanitation is a shared responsibility, essential not only for physical health but for the well-being of society as a whole.

### **Integrated Approach to Sanitation**

The concept of an integrated approach to sanitation goes beyond mere infrastructure development, such as access to toilets and clean water. It includes a holistic perspective that combines health, social justice, environmental protection, and human dignity. Both Indian and global thinkers have emphasized the necessity of treating sanitation as a multidimensional issue.

Mahatma Gandhi's assertion that "*Sanitation is more important than independence*" (Gandhi, 1937) highlights how critical cleanliness is to both personal and national well-being. For Gandhi, sanitation was intertwined with the larger project of India's freedom, symbolizing the fight against the social evils of caste and inequality. His vision of an integrated approach to sanitation included not only physical cleanliness but also spiritual and social reform. Gandhi's community sanitation campaigns, particularly in rural areas, sought to

address the issue holistically by involving every individual in the process of maintaining their surroundings, emphasizing communal responsibility.

Swami Vivekananda and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar added layers of spiritual and social justice to the concept of sanitation. Vivekananda stated that “*Cleanliness is the first and foremost thing that should be observed*” (Vivekananda, 1901). His call for physical purity paralleled his emphasis on mental and spiritual purity, representing an integrated approach to self-improvement and social reform. Ambedkar, on the other hand, linked sanitation directly to the caste system, describing it as a reflection of the discriminatory practices embedded in Indian society (Ambedkar, 1994). His focus was on the plight of sanitation workers, often from the Dalit community, who faced both social ostracism and health hazards. Ambedkar's call for equality extended to recognizing the dignity of labour, thus integrating social justice into the sanitation discourse.

Globally, the integrated approach has been similarly multifaceted. Nelson Mandela's statement, “*Sanitation should not be a privilege. It is a fundamental human right*” (Mandela, 1994), echoes the sentiment that access to sanitation is as important as access to education or healthcare. His view represents a human rights-based approach to sanitation, recognizing that without adequate sanitation, the basic rights of individuals, particularly the poor, are compromised. Florence Nightingale, one of the pioneers of modern nursing, emphasized sanitation as a critical factor in healthcare, stating that cleanliness was the foundation of a functional health system (Nightingale, 1859). By integrating sanitation into healthcare practices, Nightingale laid the groundwork for modern public health protocols.

Environmental sustainability is another crucial component of an integrated sanitation approach. The ancient Indian texts, like the *Rigveda*, emphasize the sanctity of water and the necessity of keeping it clean for the benefit of society (Rigveda, 10.9.6). This ancient wisdom aligns with modern environmental practices that advocate for the sustainable management of water resources, proper waste disposal, and the preservation of ecosystems. Contemporary movements like the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Mission), launched in 2014, reflect the integration of public health, social reform, and environmental stewardship in the sanitation dialogue.

## II. Conclusion

An integrated approach to sanitation acknowledges the complexity and interconnectedness of health, social justice, environmental sustainability, and human dignity. Both Indian and global thinkers have recognized that sanitation is not an isolated issue but one that reflects the broader moral, social, and political frameworks of a society. From Mahatma Gandhi's focus on personal and societal cleanliness to Nelson Mandela's emphasis on sanitation as a human right, the discourse on sanitation has continually evolved to address the needs of modern societies. This integrated approach, which combines health, social equity, and environmental sustainability, offers a comprehensive solution to one of the most pressing issues of our time. Through collective action and policy innovation, communities can work toward creating a world where sanitation is accessible to all, and the dignity of every individual is upheld.

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