

Meet Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak

The 2009 Stockholm Water Prize Laureate

On August 20, during the World Water Week in Stockholm, Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak will receive the 2009 Stockholm Water Prize for his lifelong dedication to improve public health, advance social progress, and improve human rights in India and internationally. Dr. Pathak shares his reflections and visions on his ongoing quest for clean and dignified lives for all people.

What does the Stockholm Water Prize mean for your work and for the Sulabh mission?

The Stockholm Water Prize means vindication and a global recognition of our ideals, and our efforts for the last four decades to promote sanitation among the millions of the poor in the world who do not have access to the same. I also felt humbled and had a feeling of happiness to share with others. What has added to the value of the prize is the fact that silent millions have accepted and put to practice the innovations that I have made in the field of sanitation, which have helped them better their lives.

How would you describe the development and success in the Sulabh mission?

In the colonial era, the British rulers took the first initiative for introduction of sanitary systems in the country in 1870 when sewerage system was introduced in Calcutta, then the capital of the country. But the sewerage system remained confined to a handful of cities and most of the people living in the urban, peri-urban and rural areas had to cope with extreme difficulties in absence of a cost-effective and user friendly system of human excreta disposal. The situation remains largely the same even decades after Independence. The decades were also co-terminus with the prevalence of defecation in the open and use of the bucket toilets with human scavenging. Efforts of social reformers, experts and various committees and consultants could not make any significant dent in the situation in the absence of an appropriate technology which could prevent open defecation and remove manual scavenging.

It is at this juncture that I came up with the concept of two-pit pour-flush toilets, popularised it in the name of Sulabh Shauchalayas and mounted a successful and



Photo: Sulabh International Social Service Organisation

multipronged attack on the prevailing dehumanising systems and practices. Social mobilisation was combined with scientific innovation and invention to develop a delivery system which involved cooperation and collaboration between government and local bodies/community/civil society organisations and the people. Simultaneously, I introduced and popularised the concept of public toilets run on pay-and-use basis combined with exemplary round-the-clock maintenance. Starting from an obscure town in the state of Bihar in India, 1.2 million Sulabh model two-pit pour-flush household toilets and more than 7,500 public toilets have been built, run and maintained by Sulabh International Social Service Organisation all over the country and are being used by 10 million people every day. More

than 54 million Sulabh model of individual toilets have been built in the rural areas with the efforts of the Government of India and the state governments, and are being used by about 300 million people every day. In the process we have liberated more than a million scavengers from the demeaning practice of manual collection and carrying of human excreta.

As an "action sociologist" and not as an engineer, how did you develop your sanitation innovations?

Application of the mind is more important than mere knowledge alone. Knowledge can be borrowed but not the mind nor the art of its application. I pick up small pieces of information and strands of thoughts from various sources and start working on them to find

answers. To solve the problems I have noticed that if and when technology is needed I get a flash in my mind which provides a solution to the problem. Sometimes this may appear to be unconventional and peculiar, but it works. With my academic background of an “action sociologist”, I was deeply motivated and inspired by the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi – the Father of the Nation, for the removal of scavenging and untouchability from society and promotion of environmental sanitation by the elimination of open defecation. An in-depth study of the sanitation scenario in India, during the pre-Independence and post-Independence era convinced me that neither would the sewerage, nor the septic tank systems, be able to address the gigantic problem of lack of sanitation in urban and rural India. I came across a WHO publication “Excreta disposal for rural areas and small communities” by Edmund A. Wagner and J.N. Lanoix, which led me to the design of the twin-pit pour-flush compost toilet. The present designs and specifications were developed through years of experimentation and pilot studies.

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What is your vision for Sulabh, and for your work over the next decade?

Today more than 2.6 billion people in the world lack access to sanitation and over 1.1 billion lack access to safe drinking water. In India nearly 650 million people do not have access to improved sanitation facilities. As an organisation with a family of more than 50,000 dedicated volunteers, Sulabh must rededicate their services to be equal to the challenging tasks. Total abolition of scavenging and elimination of untouchability from society, restoration of human rights and social dignity for the scavengers, promotion of a safe system of human excreta disposal in urban and rural areas, and ensuring the security and safety of our natural water sources are the basis of our future dream and vision. We have miles to go before we sleep.

We are planning to provide five public toilets linked with biogas plants and effluent treatment technology, 500 Sulabh toilets in individual houses and Sulabh toilets in 100 schools in 50 countries to show them that they can solve the problems of lack of toilets in their own countries. Our technolo-

gies are free from patent: any organisation or country can adopt them free of charges without any royalty. These technologies can help other countries to achieve the MDG target on sanitation. We cannot rest on our laurels until and unless each and everyone in this world has a safe and sanitary home and safe and potable drinking water in adequate quantity.

What have been the greatest personal rewards from your work?

I have the most satisfying sense of personal reward when I see that my humble innovations and inventions are being put to use by the silent millions not only in India but also in other developing countries. I am proud that our dedicated efforts for promotion of sanitation and restoration of human rights and social dignity have been recognised globally and are being scaled up and replicated in many countries. To see the pride and self dignity on the faces of women relieved from their humiliating work of scavenging of night-soil, is possibly the greatest source of joy in my life.

Are there lessons to be drawn from your experiences in sanitation and health that could apply to other important challenges facing the world?

The most significant lesson I learned is that to get scavengers relieved from the practice of human scavenging an appropriate technology support and delivery mechanism was needed. Creating awareness and preaching behavioural changes would not have the desired result unless we support them with an appropriate, affordable and user-friendly technology.

Do you have any time for hobbies and interests outside of your work?

During my childhood and as a boy I had the hobbies of playing football, seeing football matches; singing, dance and music. When I went to college I developed the hobby of seeing films and to sing songs, at times I would watch four films in a day. During the last 39 years, I have not seen more than 20 films because of my preoccupation with the work of sanitation and social reform. However, now, photography, reading, writing and singing songs are my hobbies. Occasionally, I write poems and compose music too. I have also turned to collecting toilet related artifacts and materials of olden days. Such a collection has enabled me to set up a unique museum of toilets on our campus in Delhi.



Photos: Sulabh International Social Service Organisation

The Sulabh International Institute of Health and Hygiene has created hygiene curricula for young schoolchildren and their teachers, provided sanitation and health training for volunteer instructors in slums, and opened centres providing basic healthcare for urban poor.

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