# Making Waste-removal Caste-neutral

## What is the issue?

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- With Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA), there is also a need for making the waste-removal profession caste-neutral.
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***A clean village exists because an 'unclean' caste is forced to absorb the 'filth' of the village.***

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## What is SBA?

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- Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA) was a nationwide initiative to clean public spaces.
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- It aimed at inspiring the public to voluntarily clean public spaces as a service to the nation.
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- The government is resolved to accomplish the vision of a clean India by 2019.
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- The campaign initially highlighted images of celebrities "voluntarily" sweeping the streets.
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- Concurrently, municipalities began to employ more contractual labourers.
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## What are the concerns?

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- **Deaths** - The campaign hardly addresses a reworking of the underground

sewerage system.
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- Many labourers have died recently while cleaning jammed manholes that open into the sewerage system.
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- The disturbing fact is that these deaths have a caste pattern.
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- In 2017, over 300 cases of such deaths were reported mostly from particular caste groups.
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- **Role** - The campaign burdens the contractual labourer with an ‘exclusive’ right to cleaning public spaces.
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- But it makes it a voluntary act for the ‘public’ to not defecate, urinate or litter in random spaces.
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- There is a lack of punitive measures to urge public to follow healthy practices.
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- **Attitude** - In India, waste carries the stigma that is attached to pollution and caste.
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- It is thus carried on to the process of removal (‘scavenging’) and the occupation (‘scavenger’).
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- The waste remover in India is not a professional, like in the West.
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- **Collection** - In the past, municipalities erected bins in common places for the shops and households to dispose of waste.
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- Under SBA, these bins were the first to be removed, as it offered door-to-door collection.
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- Members from the households now bring unsegregated garbage which is collected by the workers.
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- The workers collect them and it is then sent to the composting yard where workers segregate the waste.
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- Manually segregating the waste at the landfill compromises their hygiene and health.
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- **Caste** - The door-to-door service has several darker undertones.
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- Until they were banned in 1993, dry latrines were emptied through a similar door-to-door service.
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- The workers blow whistle to indicate their arrival to the households.
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- Not only this, it also announced the presence of a lower caste person.
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- This was in order to warn caste Hindus from crossing their paths.
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- In the colonial past and even now in some places, toilet locations are planned with caste notions.
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## What is the Western approach?

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- **Approach** - The Western model aims at removing waste from the public gaze.
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- Stopping the spread of disease was the primary intention in the West.
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- However, sanitation is now largely an extension of visual aesthetics as well.
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- Sanitation now means more the absence of “filthiness all around us”.
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- The West introduced technologies to systematically remove waste.
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- **London** - The Londoners experienced the ‘Great Stink’ in 1858.
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- The government then realised the need for a holistic sewerage plan that become part of the water infrastructure.
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- It aimed at removing filth and treating waste from the river Thames in a sustainable way.
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- Soon, the construction of toilets in households and shops became mandatory.
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## What should India do?

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- Similarities between secular SBA and casteist form of manual scavenging are evident, but unnoticed.
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- While cleaning is a voluntary ‘service’ for caste Hindus, collecting and disposing waste remains a ‘duty’ for particular castes.
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- Thus the stigma attached to sanitary labour, place and waste should be critically addressed.
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- Any tangible achievement of a clean India is possible only by caste-neutralising these professions.
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- Adoption of advanced technologies in waste management, collection and disposal can go a long way.
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**Source: The Hindu**

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