

Jan Swasthya Abhiyan

(Peoples Health Movement – India)

Health for All - Now!

Health is a Basic Human Right!

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National Co-ordination Committee:

All India People's Science Network (AIPSN)
All India Drug Action Network (AIDAN)
All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA)
Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti (BGVS)
Breast Feeding Promotion Network in India (BPNI)
Catholic Health Association of India (CHAI)
Centre for Community Health and Social Medicine, JNU
Christian Medical Association of India (CMAI)
Forum for Creche and Child Care Services (FORCES)
Fed. of Medical Representative Assns. of India (FMRAI)
Health Watch
Joint Women's Programme (JWP)
Medico Friends Circle (MFC)
National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM)
National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW)
National Association of Women's Orgs. (NAWO)
Public Health Resource Network (PHRN)
SAMA – Resource Group on Women's Health
SATHI – CEHAT
Society for Community Health Awareness
Research and Action [SOCHARA]

Participating Organisations:

Over 1000 organisations concerned with health care and health policy from both within and outside the above networks.

PRESS RELEASE

JSA demands an end to Vigilantism in the name of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan

The Jan Swasthya Abhiyan (JSA) expresses deep shock at the murder of Zafar Hussain, a 55 year old social worker of Pratapgarh in Rajasthan. Zafar Hussain was publicly lynched in a frenzy by Municipal employees linked to the government's 'Swachh Bharat Abhiyan' (SBA), led according to Press reports by Nagar Parishad Commissioner Ashok Jain. Zafar Hussain's only crime was that he objected to the photographing of women defecating in the open. Those being photographed included the victim's wife and 14 year old daughter. Reports suggest that a massive cover up of the incident is being attempted and the perpetrators are yet to be apprehended.

Zafar had in the past submitted a memorandum against the harassment of women by civic officials, which included bullying and shaming of women blamed of defecating in the open, taking their pictures, running after women, taking away their water mugs and abusing them while they defecated.

Vigilantism is rampant in the SBA

This is not an isolated incident but a consequence of the SBA's 'name and shame strategy' where personnel linked to the program organize vigilante squads that hound individuals they find violating the program's objectives. Instances of such vigilante actions are being reported from many parts of the country. As the bulk of people who do not have domestic latrines or access to community latrines are the poor, this strategy has become an excuse for victimizing the poor for their appalling living conditions.

In Pratapgarh, reports clearly indicate that the people sought to be victimized were forced to defecate in open fields because latrines had not been constructed for them. In fact only days before the murder the victim himself had petitioned authorities demanding latrines and other sanitary facilities in the colony. A recent report indicates that data on open defecation (ODF) free villages is being fudged extensively and at least 25% of villages declared ODF in the country do not have functioning toilet facilities accessible to all households.

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Blaming the poor for their Conditions of Living

As a health coalition JSA believes that access to latrines and good sanitation is a basic human right and the poor stand to benefit the most from such access. However the manner in which the poor are being victimized in the course of the campaign smacks of extreme insensitivity to the conditions in which they live and an attitude of contempt towards their inhuman situation. People do not choose to survive amid squalor and dirt, they are forced to do so because the country's developmental processes have continued to ignore their needs. Ignoring this stark reality of 21st century India, in many states the vigilantism linked to the campaign extends to denying the poor access to the public distribution system and other benefits from the government.

We understand that the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan is a flagship program of the government and seems to be very high on the government's priority given that it has been repeatedly held out as a model by the government and the Prime Minister himself. Yet there is a huge gap between rhetoric and delivery as evident from the meager increase in allocation in the union budget for water and sanitation programs, especially a decline in real terms of allocation to water supply in rural areas. All criticisms regarding the program are brushed aside and in April 2017 a lady IAS officer was slapped with a show cause notice by the MP government for questioning the methods used in the campaign. The government seems to be oblivious of the fact that no public campaign can succeed without participation of the people and such participation cannot be secured by extreme coercive measures. The Government needs to ponder the kind of message it is sending across by attempting to run the program by letting loose vigilante squads on poor people, who are the victims of the skewed developmental priorities of the government. It is of concern that school children are being encouraged to be part of this form of vigilantism. Incapable of providing people basic human conditions of living, including access to basic sanitation facilities, the government has no right to snatch from them the right to live in dignity. The program is insensitive towards the poor, towards women and towards the marginalized. It works on the premise that the poor are actually responsible for the pitiable conditions in which they are forced to survive.

Put an Immediate Stop to this heinous practice of 'name and shame'

The Jan Swasthya Abhiyan demands that a high level inquiry be instituted as regards the lynching in Pratapgarh so that a modicum of justice is dispensed and the guilty are punished in accordance with the gravity of the crime.

The JSA demands that the strategy of 'name and shame' linked to the SBA be stopped forthwith and all vigilante squads be disbanded. Victimization of those unable to access latrines should be stopped immediately.

The JSA is very concerned at the assault on privacy of individuals (especially of women) through photographing or videography that has been legitimised by the government as part of Swachh Bharat Abhiyan strategies. We demand that all states must put an immediate stop to all such practices. Such acts should be viewed as gender based violence and should attract penal provisions related to sexual harassment of women.

The JSA would support any sensitive and participatory process that is designed to secure universal access to sanitation facilities. Unfortunately the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan's laudable objectives are doomed to fail given a design that relies on vigilantism and coercion and promotes an attitude of 'victim blaming'.

Issued on behalf of Jan Swasthya Abhiyan

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