

Toilet: Ek Prem Katha - A Cinematic Catalyst for Sanitation Awareness and Social Change in India

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Abstract: This research explores the role of *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* in promoting sanitation awareness in India, particularly its contribution to the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan. The objective is to analyze how the film raised public awareness and inspired behavioural change through its narrative. By using secondary sources like government documents, media articles, and academic research, the study analyses the film's narrative, its connection to public health campaigns, and its effect on social attitudes. It employs content analysis to identify themes such as sanitation awareness, media impact, and public reaction. The findings reveal that the film skilfully blended humour, emotion, and a strong message to confront traditional beliefs and promote conversations about open defecation and hygiene. Social media played a big role in boosting its reach, with viewers appreciating its relatable plot and ties to real-life challenges. Reports showed a rise in the demand for toilets in rural areas following the film's release. The research underscores the potential of cinema as a powerful agent for social change. Although some critics pointed out the film's close ties to government efforts, its overall impact on sanitation awareness and societal attitudes highlights the significant role storytelling can play in fostering progressive change.

Keywords: Cinema and Public Health, Storytelling for Social Impact, Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, Sanitation Awareness, Toilet: Ek Prem Katha,

I. INTRODUCTION

India's journey towards development has been filled with victories and obstacles. Indian cinema has successfully played its role in becoming a powerful tool for social commentary and shaping national consciousness. In India, films like *Peepli Live* (2010), *Pad Man* (2018), and *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* (2017) focus on important social issues such as rural poverty, menstrual health, and sanitation. These films present tough topics through stories that many people can relate to, often leading to conversations and promoting change. For instance, *Peepli Live* looks at the struggles of farmers during an agrarian crisis, while *Pad Man* tells the story of Arunachalam Muruganantham, a social activist who made affordable sanitary products

for women in rural areas, highlighting the importance of menstrual hygiene. All three films aim to break down social taboos and cultural barriers related to vital health and hygiene practices.

Sanitation is crucial for public health and human dignity, but many areas in India still struggle with proper sanitation facilities. In 2014, the Indian government started the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Mission), a national effort aimed at stopping open defecation, building sanitation infrastructure, and increasing awareness about hygiene. The main goal of this mission is to ensure everyone has access to sanitation, eliminate open defecation, and enhance waste management in both urban and rural areas. It is based on the belief that cleanliness and sanitation are vital for public health, environmental health, and social respect.

The mission focuses on getting the community involved, changing behaviours, and working together with different groups. To support this, the government offers ₹12,000 to each household for building toilets, particularly in rural regions. There is also a big effort in awareness campaigns and teaching about hygiene and waste management, with help from local volunteers (Swachhagrahis), NGOs, and corporate social responsibility programs^[20].

The campaign's impact is boosted by media, such as the yearly Swachh Survekshan rankings, which motivate cities and towns to enhance their cleanliness. The mission has also received global backing, with financial help from the World Bank and Asian Development Bank aimed at strengthening waste management and sanitation systems in cities^[21, 22].

Choosing cinema to convey this message is significant in India, where films play a major role in culture and connect with people from different backgrounds and languages. Research shows that media, especially films, can strongly affect behaviour and promote social change in health and hygiene practices^[5]. Films like *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* show how popular films

can connect government policies with the public, especially in areas where strong traditions might oppose change.

Toilet: Ek Prem Katha focuses on the problem of open defecation and poor sanitation in rural India. Based on real events, it follows a newlywed woman who insists on having a toilet in her new home. This demand pushes her husband to face social and family challenges to provide one. The film was released to support the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan initiative and received praise from Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who recognized it as an important way to raise awareness about sanitation and encourage communities to be free from open defecation ^[1].

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Gupta (2019) suggests that in India, cinema plays a big role in culture, and films that tackle social issues have been influencing public views for a long time. Indian Cinema, especially, has made films about various social topics, such as gender equality and sanitation. These films often spark conversations and actions that go beyond just watching them in theatres.

Kumar (2017) states that cinema serves two key functions. It highlights social problems and motivates people to act. Films simplify complex concepts through emotional narratives and characters that audiences can relate to. This approach can help lessen the stigma on subjects like sanitation, making people more open to change. For instance, Kumar's study on Pad Man indicates that the film played a significant role in reducing the stigma surrounding menstrual hygiene in India. It initiated discussions about menstrual health and raised awareness. The film had a lead character who advocated for low-cost sanitary products. This shifted public opinion and boosted awareness of this crucial topic.

The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan began in 2014. It opened doors for media campaigns aimed at enhancing sanitation in India. A report from the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation in 2018 details how popular culture aided this initiative. Films and media campaigns highlighted the importance of hygiene and toilets. For instance, Toilet: Ek Prem Katha was instrumental in changing behaviours. The film supported the government's aim to eliminate open defecation by encouraging public involvement and promoting toilet use in rural areas. The report emphasizes that the film brought the issue of open defecation into public conversation, making it a widely discussed topic.

Rao (2018) notes that Toilet: Ek Prem Katha acted as a "soft power tool" to enhance awareness about sanitation. The film addressed social, health, and gender issues related to open defecation. Additionally, Rao notes that the film's success was enhanced by government support, which added credibility to it as a public health campaign, broadening its influence and effectiveness. Cinema plays a key role in raising awareness about sanitation as part of a larger movement where films tackling public health topics create significant changes in social attitudes.

In a study by Chatterjee (2015) on health-related films in India, it was found that films like Peepli Live and Pad Man not only boosted awareness but also motivated both government and non-government organizations to respond. Chatterjee suggests that by focusing on personal stories within broader social problems, these films help to lessen the feeling of separation from affected communities, making the issues more relatable and pressing for a larger audience.

Singh (2018) studied how well media campaigns support the goals of Swachh Bharat. He observed that campaigns linked to popular films or cultural stories tend to succeed more because they connect emotionally with people. Singh highlighted that while building infrastructure is important, changing attitudes often needs cultural support, which films can provide effectively. His research indicates that Toilet: Ek Prem Katha did more than entertain; it helped create a cultural change by presenting toilet construction as a moral and health necessity, which strongly appealed to rural areas.

According to Sharma (2019), Films that tackle public health topics like sanitation and menstrual health act as "conversation starters". In rural regions, where literacy can be low and traditional media might not reach everyone, films help spread information and spark discussions on important matters. Sharma emphasizes how cinema plays a crucial role in presenting sanitation as both a health necessity and a social duty, aiding public health objectives through entertainment.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research applies agenda-setting theory and social cognitive theory. Agenda-setting theory suggests that the media can influence what the public considers important by focusing on specific topics. For instance, the film Toilet: Ek Prem Katha raised awareness about

sanitation issues, potentially altering perceptions of open defecation. Bandura's social cognitive theory indicates that individuals learn behaviours by observing others. The film depicted characters who opposed open defecation, demonstrating positive actions that could motivate viewers to follow suit.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data Collection and Analysis

Literature and Reports: Academic papers and government publications on the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, sanitation awareness, and cinema's impact on society.

Media Coverage: Articles, opinion pieces, and reviews published in major Indian newspapers and magazines.

Social Media Analysis: Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram posts related to the film and its messages.

Using content analysis, the data was categorized based on themes such as "sanitation awareness," "government campaigns," "media influence," and "public response." This thematic categorization allowed for an in-depth understanding of how the film influenced public discourse on sanitation.

V. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES:

- To analyze how Toilet: Ek Prem Katha influenced public awareness and attitudes toward sanitation in India.
- To explore the role of cinematic storytelling as a medium for promoting social change, specifically in the context of sanitation and public health.

VI. RESEARCH STATEMENT

Toilet: Ek Prem Katha uses its narrative and cinematic approach to emphasize the importance of sanitation as a cornerstone for India's progress.

VII. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

A. Storytelling

The storytelling in Toilet: Ek Prem Katha combines humour, social messages, and emotional drama. This makes it effective for discussing sensitive topics like sanitation and women's empowerment. Directed by Shree Narayan Singh, the film follows a straightforward story. The main character, Keshav, works to build a toilet for his wife, Jaya. She refuses to live in his village without one. This simple but powerful story highlights bigger issues. It explores

social development, traditional beliefs, and gender equality in rural India.

Narrative Style

The film's story focuses on a clear problem: the lack of toilets in rural India. What makes the storytelling special is how it uses a personal and relatable story to highlight a big social issue. The conflict starts when Jaya refuses to live with Keshav in a house without a toilet. This pushes Keshav to take on the challenge of building one. The story is simple but meaningful. It helps the audience connect with the issue of sanitation through the characters' struggles. Its fable-like structure makes it easy for people from different backgrounds to understand the importance of basic sanitation and how it affects daily life.

Character Development

The character-driven storytelling is central to the film's success. Keshav and Jaya's relationship acts as a metaphor for the broader struggle between progress and tradition. Jaya, is portrayed as a strong and determined woman and she represents modernity and the desire for change. Keshav starts as someone who is stuck in his traditional mindset. Keshav's character develops over time, starting as someone who resists change. He eventually becomes a man who challenges societal norms to meet his wife's basic needs. This change in Keshav reflects the broader change happening in India regarding sanitation. Just like Keshav, India is slowly moving towards better sanitation, breaking old habits and improving lives. Keshav's character arc is not just about building a toilet. It's also about empowering women, protecting their dignity, and showing the importance of education and awareness. These factors help break traditional barriers and bring about positive change.

Humor and Social Commentary

Humour is important in Toilet: Ek Prem Katha. The film mixes serious social issues with light-hearted moments, making the topic of sanitation easier to understand. The humour comes from absurd situations, like the villagers refusing to accept a toilet because of tradition. This makes the message more interesting and less preachy. By combining humour with serious issues, the film appeals to a wide audience. It encourages people to think about sanitation without making the topic feel too heavy.

Cinematography and Visual Style

The cinematography in the film supports its story. The contrast between the beautiful rural landscapes and the harsh reality of sanitation problems creates a strong visual message. The rural areas are shown as lovely and full of promise, but this is overshadowed by the lack of basic services like toilets. This visual approach reinforces the film's message that real development involves addressing basic needs and ensuring dignity for all citizens. The contrast serves as a reminder that progress cannot be achieved without addressing fundamental issues like sanitation.

B. Budget and Box Office Collection

Toilet: Ek Prem Katha was a big success at the box office, both in India and abroad. Made with an estimated budget of ₹18 crores, the film earned around ₹134.22 crores in India. Internationally, the film earned ₹15.94 crores more, bringing its total worldwide earnings to about ₹150.16 crores. This success shows that the film appealed to a large audience and highlights how people are more willing to engage with important social issues, like sanitation, through popular films.

The film was a big hit at the box office and also won several important awards. It won the National Film Award for Best Choreography in 2018. In 2017, it received the Zee Cine Award for Best Film and the Zee Cine Award for Extraordinary Impact. These awards show how the film played a key role in promoting social change. The Matri Shree Media Award for Best Feature Film in 2018 further confirmed its contribution to promoting social issues and encouraging conversations about women's empowerment and sanitation in India.

C. Government Reports

The Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) offers valuable insights into the progress and effects of sanitation initiatives in India. The SBM, focuses on making India Open Defecation Free (ODF) and improving sanitation access. As of 2019, SBM had helped build over 100 million toilets, declared over 600,000 villages ODF, and significantly reduced diarrheal deaths by 300,000.

Phase II of the SBM emphasizes sustainability, with a focus on waste management and continued improvements in sanitation infrastructure. It has received support through an investment of ₹1.40 lakh crores to enhance both infrastructure and community participation in cleanliness campaigns. These reports reflect the broader societal and

behavioural changes sought by the government, closely aligned with the themes explored in the film, particularly the importance of sanitation and its direct impact on women's safety and dignity.

Key Achievements

Toilet Construction: The Swachh Bharat Mission has built over 100 million toilets in India, giving many families access to basic sanitation. This program has reduced health risks linked to open defecation.

ODF Status: By 2019, more than 600,000 villages were declared Open Defecation Free (ODF), a big step in ending open defecation, which causes diseases like diarrhea. As a result, waterborne diseases decreased, and a World Health Organization report showed that there were 300,000 fewer diarrhea deaths in 2019 compared to 2014. In ODF villages, families also saved about INR 50,000 a year on health costs. Moreover, improved sanitation led to reduced contamination of groundwater, benefiting both public health and the environment.

Phase II and Sustainability

The SBM Phase II continues the success of Phase I. Its goal is to keep villages ODF and solve waste management issues, like solid and liquid waste, in rural India. The government has allocated Rs. 1.40 lakh crores to improve sanitation and support the vision of complete cleanliness, or Sampurn Swachhata.

Societal and Cultural Influence

The Swachh Bharat Mission has greatly changed how people think about cleanliness. Campaigns like "Swachhata hi Sewa" have encouraged millions to take part in cleaning efforts. One of the biggest benefits of this initiative has been improving women's safety and dignity. With private toilets available, women no longer had to go outside, which was often dangerous and unsafe.

D. Media Reviews

Public Reactions on Social Media and Advocacy

After the film came out, social media sites such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook experienced a surge in activity. Viewers reacted favourably to the film's connection with the Swachh Bharat Mission. Many viewers liked how it mixed social awareness with entertainment by using an easy-to-understand story to showcase sanitation problems. The film got good

reviews on Twitter, with both industry professionals and everyday viewers commending its take on sanitation. Some critics pointed out the heavy government backing featured in the film ^[16, 18, 19].

Toilet: Ek Prem Katha generated significant conversation on social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. Many users praised the film for its social message and its link to the Swachh Bharat Mission. The film's creative approach to the problem of open defecation resonated with both rural and urban sanitation issues in India. Audiences, particularly on Twitter, appreciated how the film combined entertainment with important social themes, making the subject matter accessible and relatable to many people ^[18, 19].

On Twitter, the hashtag #ToiletEkPremKatha trended for a while as audiences shared their approval of the film's theme. Many praised lead actors Akshay Kumar and Bhumi Pednekar for taking on such an unusual project. Kumar's role as a man fighting societal taboos to get his wife a toilet was seen as powerful. People appreciated how the film addressed serious issues with both humour and sincerity. The film's release also attracted brands and influencers who joined the conversation, helping to spread its message about sanitation and supporting the Swachh Bharat Mission.

Instagram reactions included posts by fans and influencers discussing the film's importance in breaking taboos, particularly for women in rural areas. Kumar and Pednekar's posts on their Instagram profiles helped further awareness by sharing statistics on sanitation, snapshots of public toilets installed in villages, and short videos discussing the Swachh Bharat initiative. Many comments showed viewers identifying with the social message, with some even discussing personal experiences related to sanitation and hygiene improvements due to the campaign's influence ^[15, 18].

Facebook saw similar engagement, with users sharing videos, reviews, and memes related to the film's themes. The film's message about sanitation sparked supportive discussions and shares, with audiences applauding its focus on public health. These discussions highlighted how cinema can make difficult societal issues accessible and encourage grassroots support for change in areas like sanitation. This social media response, bolstered by influencer and celebrity endorsements, showcased how Toilet: Ek Prem Katha helped raise awareness about

sanitation needs and contributed to ongoing advocacy for better public health infrastructure across India ^[18].

Quotes, Opinions, and Media Analysis on the Film's Influence

Media reviews offered a mix of perspectives, with some critics noting that the film occasionally leaned into government promotional territory¹³. Media reports highlighted the film's significant contribution to raising awareness about sanitation challenges in rural India. The coverage commended the film for effectively merging social commentary with entertainment elements. Critics expressed divergent views, particularly regarding the film's pronounced propagandist tone.

Positive Reviews

Many media outlets and critics praised the film for addressing sanitation issues, especially open defecation in rural India. Some reviews noted its strength in tackling a serious health issue while staying entertaining. Critics also praised Akshay Kumar's performance, calling his portrayal of a man challenging societal norms to build a toilet for his wife heart-warming and powerful ^[18, 16]. Bhumi Pednekar also received praise for playing a woman fighting for her basic rights to dignity and sanitation. Many viewers, especially women, related to her character's struggles ^[17].

Criticisms

Some critics and media outlets criticized the film for its strong connection to the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan. They felt the film's clear support for the government's campaign was too promotional. These critics argued that while the film's message was important, its narrative sometimes felt like a "government advertisement," which took away from its artistic value.

Public Opinions and Memes

Social media platforms, especially Twitter and Instagram, showed strong support for the film's message. Many viewers praised it for addressing a topic often ignored in mainstream cinema. Social media was filled with memes, quotes, and personal stories, all showing admiration for how the film entertained while promoting social change ^[15]. Fans on Twitter tweeted about the positive impact of the film, with several sharing their own experiences with sanitation issues and the importance of clean public toilets.

This film reflects diverse perspectives on its impact and message. Many reviewers appreciated the film's focus on sanitation and open defecation, especially for raising awareness about the Swachh Bharat Mission. Akshay Kumar's role was praised for adding credibility. Bhumi Pednekar's performance brought emotional depth.

E. Identifying Behavioural Change or Support for Sanitation Initiatives

The influence of *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* extended beyond raising awareness; it also appeared to encourage behavioural change and support for sanitation initiatives, especially in rural India. This was evident in the film's role in amplifying discussions around the importance of household toilets, particularly among women, who are most affected by sanitation issues. The film highlighted sanitation-related challenges faced by women, such as dignity, safety, and privacy, which contributed to its resonance among viewers.

Reports indicated a rise in demand for household toilets in certain regions following the film's release, as many viewers connected with its message. This increase in demand aligns with studies showing that targeted media can influence public health behaviours. In areas with significant female literacy, for example, educated women were more inclined to advocate for household toilets after the film's release. This points to a broader connection between sanitation awareness, literacy, and gender empowerment. Educated women, more attuned to health benefits, often advocate for hygienic practices, emphasizing the film's role in stimulating community discussions and action toward adopting safer sanitation practices^{19, 15, 18}.

The film reinforced existing governmental efforts, notably the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Mission). Governmental reports suggested that the film's widespread popularity and the public's positive response helped drive momentum for this campaign. Through its storyline, the film illustrated the importance of basic sanitation for public health, which contributed to a cultural shift toward recognizing toilets as a necessary part of households, rather than a luxury. Social media platforms amplified these sentiments, as individuals shared stories of their villages adopting better sanitation practices, further encouraging a positive shift in public attitudes toward sanitation and hygiene^[15, 18].

VII. DISCUSSION

Toilet: Ek Prem Katha shows how cinema can help bring social change, especially in sanitation in India. The film supports the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan and focuses on the serious problem of open defecation. The film tells a relatable story about sanitation. It talks about the challenges and stigma around it. The film connects with many people and encourages conversation on a topic that is often ignored.

This film uses humour alongside social commentary to engage viewers without making the sanitation crisis feel too heavy. The film focuses on a newlywed couple's effort to build a toilet at home, making the public health issue personal and relatable. The protagonist's fight against societal norms reflects the larger struggle against outdated traditions that block progress in sanitation. The film focuses on characters and uses humour to show that sanitation is not just a health issue. It highlights its importance for dignity and gender equality.

The film aligns with the agenda-setting theory, showing how media can focus attention on important issues like sanitation. This is clear from the public's response, with many discussing sanitation and taking action. The social cognitive theory also applies, as viewers may mimic the positive behaviours seen in the film. The protagonist's shift from resistance to support for sanitation can inspire others to do the same, showing how cinema can encourage social change by modelling progressive actions.

Social media played a key role in boosting the film's impact, with discussions on platforms like Twitter and Instagram showing strong public support for the film's message. Audiences shared personal stories and praised the film, helping normalize conversations about sanitation. The film's box office success and critical recognition highlight its cultural importance and show that people are not only interested in socially relevant films but also willing to support them.

Some critics of the film pointed out its strong connection to government campaigns, calling it a "soft power tool." They argued that it sometimes felt like government propaganda. However, the film's popularity shows that audiences appreciated its clear and direct approach to an important public health issue. These critiques highlight the challenge socially driven films face: balancing artistic integrity with the need to support government or institutional goals for greater impact.

The success of *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* shows that cinema, when combined with government initiatives and media support, can strengthen public health campaigns and encourage behavioural change. The film highlights the practical importance of sanitation while also presenting it as a symbol of respect, privacy, and safety, especially for women. Through powerful storytelling and strong social media engagement, the film demonstrates the potential of cinema to raise awareness and drive social reform.

CONCLUSION

Toilet: Ek Prem Katha illustrates the potential of cinema to effect social transformation by shedding light on critical issues such as sanitation, gender equality, and public health. Associated with the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan initiative, the film employs a blend of humour, emotional depth, and a compelling message to address the challenge of open defecation in India. Its relatable narrative served to confront conventional beliefs and motivate individuals to embrace improved hygiene practices. This film demonstrated that mainstream media could significantly influence societal attitudes and foster positive behavioural changes.

The success of the film illustrates the capacity of cinema to transcend communication barriers, particularly in a culturally diverse nation such as India. *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* highlighted sanitation as a fundamental aspect of dignity and empowerment. It resonated with individuals from various backgrounds and contributed to public health initiatives. Furthermore, the film played a significant role in shifting perceptions regarding sanitation, demonstrating that entertainment can be a catalyst for social advancement.

Some criticized the film for being too aligned with the government. However, its impact is clear. *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* shows how film can spark conversations, break taboos, and support social change. It proves that storytelling can be a powerful tool for progress in society.

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