

Cleanliness and Sustainable Development: A Sociological Study of Lucknow's Swachh Survekshan Success and India's Sustainable Development Goal Ranking.

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Abstract

This research delves into the sociological aspects of India's advancements in urban sanitation and sustainability, with a particular focus on Lucknow's achievement of securing third place in the Swachh Survekshan 2024–25 and India's ranking among the top 100 countries on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Index in 2025. By employing secondary data and sociological theories, the study examines the contributions of civic participation, institutional governance, and cultural transformations to these accomplishments. The analysis draws on theoretical frameworks such as Durkheim's concept of collective consciousness, Weber's rational-legal authority, and Bourdieu's notion of habitus to understand the social underpinnings of cleanliness initiatives and sustainable development in India. The findings reveal that the alignment of government policies, public engagement, and socio-cultural changes has resulted in measurable improvements in urban sanitation and sustainability indicators. However, the study also highlights persistent challenges, including inequality, symbolic compliance, and class-based disparities in access to sanitation. It concludes that India's progress represents not only policy successes but also a broader sociological shift towards civic responsibility and collective modernity.

Keywords: Swachh Survekshan, Sustainable Development Goals, sociology, Lucknow, urban governance, collective behavior, civic participation.

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, India's emphasis on cleanliness and sustainability has become a defining feature of its developmental journey. This transformation is highlighted by two recent milestones: Lucknow's rise to the third position in the Swachh Survekshan 2024–25 rankings and India's placement among the top 100 nations in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Index 2025, securing the 99th spot out of 167 countries (Sustainable Development Solutions Network [SDSN], 2025). These accomplishments reflect not only advancements in policy execution but also a profound sociological shift in the collective behavior, civic awareness, and institutional rationalization within Indian society.

Launched in 2016 by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA) as a component of the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM), Swachh Survekshan is acknowledged as the largest urban cleanliness survey in the world (MoHUA, 2025). This survey assesses cities by examining their waste management, sanitation, citizen participation, and innovative practices. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established

by the United Nations in 2015 present a global strategy for achieving social, economic, and environmental sustainability (United Nations, 2015). India's achievements in these areas highlight the alignment between local initiatives and global development goals. This study seeks to examine these advancements from a sociological perspective, concentrating on how social structures, institutions, and cultural values both influence and are influenced by cleanliness and sustainability efforts. It explores: How do social behavior, collective identity, and institutional reforms contribute to the success of Lucknow in Swachh Survekshan and India's progress in the SDGs?

2. Literature Review

In India, research on sanitation and development has traditionally been guided by policy, but sociological perspectives have become more significant recently. Investigations into the Swachh Bharat Mission emphasize the importance of changing behaviors, social norms, and community involvement (World Bank, 2022). Dholakia (2020) contends that sanitation in India should be seen not just as an infrastructure challenge but as a representation of social hierarchies, caste interactions, and civic ethics. From a global perspective, the Sustainable Development Goals act as a framework for inclusive progress. According to Sachs et al. (2025), nations that perform well on the SDG Index usually have strong institutions and a cohesive social fabric. In India, the SDG Index by NITI Aayog (2025) reveals state-level disparities, showing that while social development is inconsistent, it is improving, particularly in urban areas.

Sociological theories offer valuable frameworks for interpreting these changes. Émile Durkheim (1893) highlighted the importance of collective consciousness in sustaining social order, a concept pertinent to understanding widespread involvement in cleanliness initiatives. Max Weber's (1947) idea of rational-legal authority sheds light on bureaucratic reforms and data-driven governance in initiatives like Swachh Survekshan. Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) theory of habitus and cultural capital elucidates how cleanliness practices become entrenched social norms and indicators of status. Together, these theories help place India's efforts in cleanliness and sustainability within the larger sociological context of modernization and social change.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study applies three core sociological perspectives.

- Durkheim's Collective Consciousness: The emphasis on cleanliness as a societal value underscores the moral unity within a community. The active involvement of Lucknow's residents in cleanliness initiatives signifies a reinforcement of collective civic principles (Durkheim 1893).
- Weber's Rational-Legal Authority: The formalization of cleanliness through administrative rankings, digital oversight, and data validation exemplifies Weberian rationalization, characterized by governance rooted in efficiency, impartiality, and bureaucratic management (Weber, 1947).
- Bourdieu's Habitus and Cultural Capital: Cleanliness transcends being merely a physical state, evolving into a form of symbolic capital that denotes civility, modernity, and social status (Bourdieu, 1977). Citizens incorporate sanitation norms into their daily habitus, fostering enduring behavioral transformations.

This research integrates these theories to present Swachh Survekshan and SDG progress as reflections of sociocultural modernization, rather than simply as results of policy implementation.

4. Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative, descriptive, and interpretive methodology, relying on secondary data sourced from government documents, international databases, and reputable news outlets. The data were obtained from the following sources:

- Swachh Survekshan 2024–25 Report (MoHUA, 2025)
- India SDG Index 2025 (NITI Aayog, 2025)
- Sustainable Development Report 2025 (SDSN, 2025)
- Peer-reviewed journals and sociological literature
- Media coverage from Hindustan Times and Press Information Bureau (PIB)

In this research, a case study approach was employed, with Lucknow selected as a typical urban location. The data underwent thematic analysis to uncover sociological trends in governance, participation, and collective actions.

5. Lucknow's Swachh Survekshan Achievement: A Sociological Perspective

Lucknow's advancement from the 41st spot in 2022 to 3rd place among India's cities with over a million residents in 2024–25 signifies a significant urban transformation (Hindustan Times, 2025). This progress is due to improved waste segregation, citizen feedback mechanisms, and municipal reforms. Yet, the true sociological importance lies in how these developments mirror the changing civic culture and urban identity.

5.1 Civic Participation and Social Solidarity

The Swachh Bharat campaign reimagines cleanliness as a collective moral responsibility, resonating with Durkheim's concept of social unity. Initiatives like community cleanups and online platforms for public feedback have fostered a shared sense of purpose among citizens. The rise in voluntary participation and local projects demonstrates how ethical values are woven into daily life.

5.2 Institutional Rationalization and Bureaucratic Efficiency

In the context of Weberian analysis, the accomplishments of Lucknow exemplify the rationalization of governance. The city has adopted data-driven management, equipped garbage trucks with GPS, and introduced a public dashboard. Through the Swachhata App, residents can directly report waste issues to the authorities, creating a transparent feedback system (MoHUA, 2025). This bureaucratic approach transforms sanitation from an informal task into a structured system.

5.3 Cleanliness as Cultural Capital

Inspired by Bourdieu, the concept of cleanliness in urban India serves as a form of cultural capital, representing modernity and civic responsibility. The middle class increasingly links cleanliness with dignity and urban pride, thereby reinforcing social distinctions between "clean" and "unclean" areas. Although this promotes collective discipline, it also poses the risk of marginalizing informal workers and slum communities (Dholakia 2020).

6. India's SDG Progress: Toward Global Modernity

In 2025, India achieved a position among the top 100 countries on the SDG Index, securing the 99th spot out of 167 nations with an overall score of 66.9 (SDSN, 2025). This accomplishment highlights progress in areas such as sanitation, health, education, and renewable energy. From a sociological standpoint, advancements in the SDGs indicate a wider modernization process that includes institutional reforms, active citizen participation, and increased environmental awareness.

6.1 Institutionalization of Sustainable Governance

The SDG Index by NITI Aayog acts as an innovative governance tool that connects state policies with quantifiable results. States like Kerala and Himachal Pradesh excel due to their high literacy rates and social equality, whereas Uttar Pradesh, which includes Lucknow, is making significant strides in urban sanitation and waste management (NITI Aayog, 2025). This framework is a representation of Weber's rational-legal bureaucracy, tailored to meet development objectives.

6.2 Sociocultural Transformation and Modernization

India's progress in achieving the SDGs indicates a cultural shift towards sustainability. The integration of environmental education, active participation of young people, and the growth of social media activism have made discussions about cleanliness and eco-friendly living more common. This is consistent with the Modernization Theory, which interprets development as a change in values, norms, and institutions (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005).

6.3 The Sociology of Global Citizenship

India's advancement in achieving the SDGs also reflects an increasing awareness of global citizenship. People are beginning to see environmental responsibility as an ethical obligation. From a sociological perspective, this indicates the rise of a new type of collective awareness that goes beyond national borders — a shared commitment to the health of our planet (Beck, 2009).

7. Interlinkages Between Swachh Survekshan and SDGs

The Swachh Survekshan program plays a significant role in advancing several Sustainable Development Goals, notably SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and SDG 13 (Climate Action). The table below demonstrates how these goals are interconnected.

SDG	Goal	Swachh Survekshan Contribution
SDG 6	Clean Water and Sanitation	It eliminates water contamination and diseases caused by it.
SDG 11	Sustainable Cities and Communities	It encourages community Participation and development of smart cities.
SDG 12	Responsible Consumption and Production	It promotes sustainable development in production and consumption.
SDG 13	Climate Action	It reduces risk of climate change by following sustainable development techniques to overcome pollution.

India illustrates how urban governance can serve as a societal tool for sustainable development by adapting these global objectives into quantifiable indicators.

8. Challenges and Sociological Contradictions

Despite this progress, several challenges persist.

8.1 Inequality and Exclusion

Enhancements in urban sanitation frequently overlook marginalized communities. Informal settlements often lack necessary infrastructure, and manual scavengers continue to face stigma, highlighting the persistent caste hierarchies (Doron & Jeffrey, 2018). From a sociological perspective, this suggests that the moral integration of all social groups into the cleanliness narrative remains incomplete.

8.2 Symbolic vs. Substantive Cleanliness

Some critics argue that the Swachh Survekshan rankings often emphasize surface-level appearances rather than focusing on long-term sustainability (News laundry, 2025). This emphasis on rankings could result in a type of compliance that prioritizes display over genuine cleanliness in everyday life.

8.3 Data and Bureaucratic Legitimacy

Although governance driven by data can improve efficiency, it might also strengthen bureaucratic control at the expense of participatory democracy. Weber's concept of the "iron cage" of rationality cautions that too much formalization can stifle human creativity and grassroots involvement (Weber, 1947).

9. Discussion

Sociological examination indicates that the success of Lucknow in the Swachh Survekshan and India's progress in the SDGs are interconnected social phenomena. The concepts of cleanliness and sustainability have transitioned from being moral imperatives to becoming established social practices. The participation of citizens in cleanliness initiatives exemplifies Durkheim's idea of social solidarity, while the use of data-driven governance aligns with Weber's notion of rationality. At the same time, incorporating cleanliness into daily routines signifies the development of a new habitus (Bourdieu, 1977). Nonetheless, development is still uneven throughout the nation. Social hierarchies and spatial disparities continue to influence access to sanitation. India's challenge is to ensure that cleanliness and sustainability transcend being mere symbols of middle-class morality and become inclusive processes of social justice. From a sociological perspective, the shift from individual accountability to collective awareness signifies the evolution of modern India.

10. Conclusion

Lucknow's ranking in the Swachh Survekshan and India's performance on the SDGs highlight the intersection of social change, institutional reform, and civic engagement in achieving tangible developmental results. Cleanliness has evolved from being a personal virtue to a public value that is integral to governance and citizen identity. Through a sociological perspective, these achievements are seen as manifestations of moral regulation, bureaucratic rationalization, and cultural transformation. Moving forward, India's challenge is to maintain these advancements by promoting inclusivity, integrating marginalized communities, and aligning urban governance with true social empowerment. As the 2030 SDG deadline approaches, India's journey underscores that sustainable development is not just an economic or environmental pursuit; it is essentially a sociological endeavor focused on fostering collective responsibility, civic morality, and participatory modernity.

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