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Bindeshwar Pathak: Two Pits, One Mission

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Bindeshwar Pathak: Two Pits, One Mission

In 1973 a municipality official gave a young man Rs 500 to build two toilets. That small start grew into a national sanitation movement. This lesson follows Bindeshwar Pathak and the Sulabh toilet.

At a glance

Four key facts on this topic

01 **1970** Sulabh movement started

02 **1973** first public toilet, Arrah

03 **1991** Padma Bhushan

04 **2023** died on 15 August

Early life and Sulabh

1 Early life and mission

1.1 Who was Bindeshwar Pathak?

Bindeshwar Pathak was an Indian social reformer and the founder of Sulabh International. He was born in **1943** at Rampur Baghel village in Bihar's Vaishali district.

He died in 2023, aged 80.

1.2 What did he study?

He finished school in his village. He then graduated in Sociology from BN College, Patna.

At Patna University he earned an MA in Sociology and an MA in English. He also earned a PhD on freeing scavengers through low-cost sanitation.

1.3 How did he come to the cause?

He joined the Gandhi Centenary Committee in Patna as a volunteer. The Committee sent him to Bettiah to work for the dignity of Dalit families.

In **1968** he joined its Bhangi-Mukti Cell. Bhangi-Mukti means the liberation of scavengers.

1.4 What did he learn there?

He travelled across India and lived with scavenger families. This was part of his PhD research.

He then took a resolve to end manual scavenging and open defecation.

> 10. **Think it through:** Why live with the families? See answer ↓

> **Quick check 1.** True or false: Pathak joined the scavengers' liberation cell of the Gandhi Centenary Committee in 1968. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: indianexpress.com; archive.siwi.org

2 Starting Sulabh in 1970

2.1 When did Sulabh begin?

Pathak started the Sulabh movement in **1970**. That year he founded the Sulabh International Social Service Organisation.

It is a non-profit body. Its aim was clean, low-cost sanitation and an end to manual scavenging.

2.2 Where was his first public toilet?

He built it in Arrah, Bihar, in **1973**. A municipality official gave him Rs 500 to build two demonstration toilets.

The demonstration worked. The authorities then sanctioned a project for wider use.

2.3 What happened in 1974?

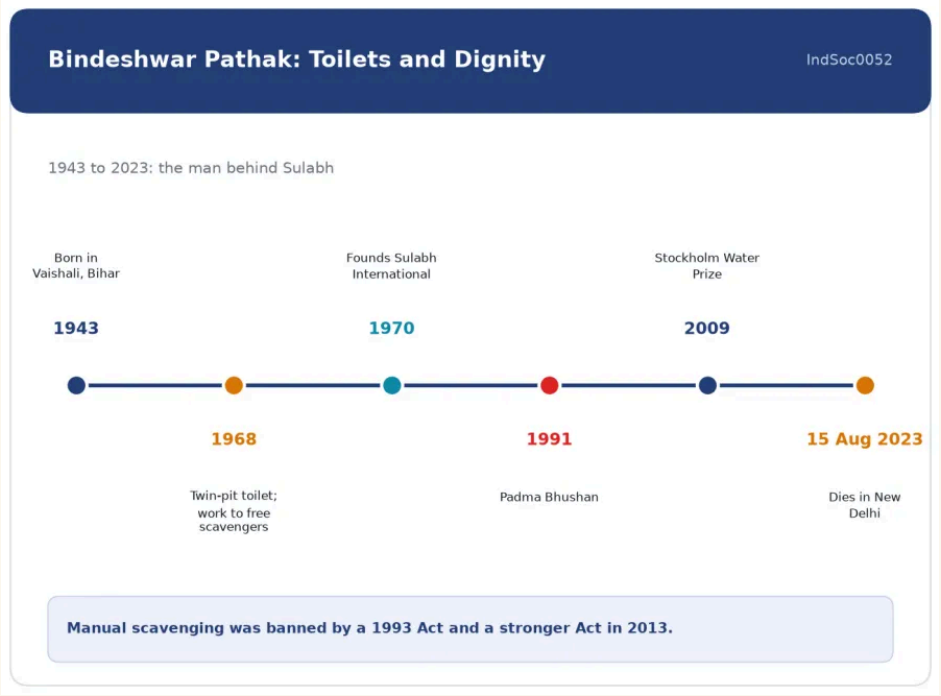
The first Sulabh public toilet opened in Patna. It had 48 seats and 20 bathrooms, along with urinals and washbasins.

That year the Bihar government also sent a circular to all local bodies. It told them to take Sulabh's help to turn bucket toilets into two-pit pour-flush toilets.

2.4 How fast did it spread?

By 1980, 25,000 people were using Sulabh public facilities in Patna alone.

Later, Sulabh public toilet and bath complexes stood at 7,500 locations. They served more than 10 million people daily.



Timeline of Bindeshwar Pathak, 1943 to 2024.

11. **Think it through:** Why did a Rs 500 start matter? See answer ↓

Quick check 2. True or false: Pathak started the Sulabh movement in 1970. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 3. True or false: His first public toilet was built in Arrah, Bihar. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: indialegallive.com

Toilet and mission

3 The twin-pit toilet

3.1 What is the Sulabh toilet?

It is the Sulabh Shauchalaya, a twin-pit pour-flush toilet. It is cheap and uses little water.

It was built to end the need for scavenging in poor communities.

3.2 Why did it need so little water?

It needs only **1.5 litres** of water per flush. A conventional toilet needs at least 10 litres.

This helps health and quality of life in water-poor regions.

3.3 How widely is it used?

More than 1.2 million homes and buildings built by Sulabh use it. The UN Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT) declared it a Global Best Practice.

Later, Sulabh reported over 1.3 million household toilets built.

3.4 What else came from the toilet?

Several Sulabh technologies turn toilet waste into biogas for heating, cooking and electricity.

A wastewater system based on duckweed and fish raising gave extra income to poor rural families.

3.5 Who pays for public toilets?

Sulabh introduced the pay-and-use public toilet. Users pay for each use.

The pay-per-use model is called economically sustainable, ecological and culturally acceptable.

> 12. **Think it through:** Why make users pay? See answer ↓

> **Quick check 4.** True or false: A Sulabh twin-pit toilet needs about 1.5 litres of water per flush. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 5.** True or false: The Sulabh toilet was designed to keep manual scavenging going. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: sulabhinternational.org

4 Beyond toilets

4.1 Did Sulabh only build toilets?

No. It also worked on health, education and rights. Its institute of health and hygiene wrote hygiene lessons for schoolchildren and teachers.

It also opened basic healthcare centres at Sulabh toilet complexes.

4.2 What about the widows of Vrindavan?

In **2012** Pathak began work for the widows of Vrindavan. He did so at the behest of the Supreme Court.

He started with a monthly stipend of Rs 2,000 for each widow.

4.3 How big is the organisation?

Sulabh has more than 50,000 associate members who give voluntary service.

With UN-HABITAT it trained engineers, planners and administrators from 14 African countries.

4.4 How did he link up with Swachh Bharat?

Sulabh's twin-pit design is widely built under the Swachh Bharat Mission. The Mission was announced on 15 August 2014.

In November 2016 Indian Railways named Pathak brand ambassador of its Swachh Rail Mission.

> 13. **Think it through:** Why add widows to a sanitation mission?
>
> See answer ↓

> **Quick check 6.** True or false: Pathak's work was limited to building toilets. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Honours and legacy

5 Honours and awards

5.1 Which awards came first?

In **1991** he received the Padma Bhushan for liberating and rehabilitating manual scavengers.

The next year he received the International St Francis Prize for Environment.

5.2 What was the Stockholm Water Prize?

He won the Stockholm Water Prize in **2009**. The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences conferred it.

The Stockholm International Water Institute lists him as the 2009 laureate. Its nominating committee said he showed how one person can change the well-being of millions.

5.3 Did the world notice?

In 2016 New York City declared 14 April as Bindeshwar Pathak Day. That year Sulabh also won the Gandhi Peace Prize.

He also wrote several books. The best known is The Road to Freedom.

5.4 What was his highest honour?

It was the **Padma Vibhushan**, India's second highest civilian award. It was announced on 26 January 2024, and he was one of five recipients that year.

President Droupadi Murmu conferred it for social work on 22 April 2024. It was posthumous, and his wife Amola received it.

> 14. **Think it through:** Why does the order matter? See answer ↓

> **Quick check 7.** True or false: Pathak received the Padma Vibhushan posthumously in 2024. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 8.** True or false: The Padma Bhushan was conferred on Pathak in 2009. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

6 His death and legacy

6.1 How did he die?

He died of a cardiac arrest on **15 August 2023**, India's 77th Independence Day. He was 80.

He had felt uneasy during the flag-hoisting at the Sulabh complex on Palam-Dabri Road, New Delhi. He was rushed to AIIMS.

6.2 What did leaders say?

Prime Minister Modi said he made it his mission to build a cleaner India. President Murmu called his work a revolutionary initiative in cleanliness.

He is survived by his wife Amola, two daughters and a son.

6.3 Why is he called the Toilet Man?

He turned a hidden, shameful subject into a public mission. His toilets reached millions and helped free families from carrying waste by hand.

He worked at the point where technology, caste and dignity meet.

> 15. **Think it through:** What is the lasting lesson? See answer ↓

> **Quick check 9.** True or false: Pathak died on Independence Day in 2023. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Exam Practice

Remember this

- **Sulabh:** Founded 1970, twin-pit pour-flush toilet
- **Arrah:** First public toilet, 1973, Rs 500
- **Water:** 1.5 litres per flush against 10
- **Honours:** Padma Bhushan 1991, Stockholm Water Prize 2009
- **Padma Vibhushan:** Posthumous, conferred 22 April 2024

Explain it back: Which honour did Pathak receive after his death?

Practice MCQs

1. Bindeshwar Pathak invented the twin-pit pour-flush toilet in 1968. In which year did he formally found Sulabh International?

A. 1970

B. 1968

C. 1973

D. 1991

See answer ↓

2. How does the twin-pit toilet design eliminate the need for manual scavenging?

A. Waste alternates between two pits, decomposing safely on its own over about two years

B. It requires a technician to empty it monthly

C. It burns waste automatically using solar heat

D. It pipes waste directly into a river for dilution

See answer ↓

3. Bindeshwar Pathak died on 15 August 2023. What had he done just hours earlier that morning?

A. Inaugurated a new toilet complex in Bihar

B. Received an honorary doctorate

C. Addressed the United Nations General Assembly

D. Hoisted the national flag at Sulabh's own complex

See answer ↓

4. Bindeshwar Pathak received the Padma Bhushan in 1991.

Which award was conferred on him posthumously in 2024?

A. Padma Vibhushan

B. Bharat Ratna

C. Nobel Peace Prize

D. Ramon Magsaysay Award

See answer ↓

5. In which international award did Bindeshwar Pathak receive recognition specifically for water and sanitation work, in 2009?

A. UNESCO World Heritage Award

B. Stockholm Water Prize

C. World Food Prize

D. Nobel Prize in Chemistry

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **A.** The correct answer is **1970**. Pathak started the Sulabh movement in 1970. That year he founded the Sulabh International Social Service Organisation. He had joined the scavengers' liberation cell in 1968, two years before. ↑ Q1
2. **A.** Manual scavenging means a person handling human excreta from an insanitary latrine or pit by hand. A latrine design that keeps raw waste away from people leaves no such work to do. That is the aim of the 2013 Act and of the SRMS rehabilitation scheme. ↑ Q2
3. **D.** The correct answer is **Hoisted the national flag at Sulabh's own complex**. He took ill during the flag-hoisting on Independence Day at the Sulabh complex on Palam-Dabri Road, New Delhi. He died of cardiac arrest at the age of 80. ↑ Q3
4. **A.** The correct answer is **Padma Vibhushan**. He received the Padma Bhushan in 1991. President Droupadi Murmu conferred the Padma Vibhushan, India's second highest civilian award, on 22 April 2024 in the field of social work. His wife received it. ↑ Q4
5. **B.** The correct answer is **Stockholm Water Prize**. Pathak won the Stockholm Water Prize in 2009. The Stockholm International Water Institute lists him as the 2009 laureate. ↑ Q5

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** That work led him to start the Sulabh movement in 1970. ↑ 1
2. **True.** He founded Sulabh International that year. ↑ 2
3. **True.** A municipality official gave him Rs 500 in 1973 for two demonstration toilets. ↑ 3
4. **True.** Conventional toilets need at least 10 litres. ↑ 4
5. **False.** It was designed to end the need for scavenging. ↑ 5
6. **False.** Sulabh also ran health, hygiene education and a widows' welfare programme. ↑ 6
7. **True.** President Murmu conferred it on 22 April 2024. ↑ 7
8. **False.** He received the Padma Bhushan in 1991. In 2009 he won the Stockholm Water Prize. ↑ 8

9. **True.** He died of cardiac arrest on 15 August 2023, aged 80. ↑ 9
10. **Think it through.** He could not end a practice he had only read about. Living with them showed him the daily cost of carrying waste by hand. ↑ 10
11. **Think it through.** It proved the idea on a small scale. Officials could see a working toilet before they paid for more. ↑ 11
12. **Think it through.** Paying makes the facility economically sustainable. It does not depend on a grant to keep running. ↑ 12
13. **Think it through.** Pathak saw dignity as one cause. People shut out by caste or widowhood faced the same neglect as scavengers. ↑ 13
14. **Think it through.** Padma Bhushan came in 1991, the Stockholm Water Prize in 2009, and Padma Vibhushan in 2024. Exams often ask which came later. ↑ 14
15. **Think it through.** A cheap, simple design can change social life. It worked because it came with a movement. ↑ 15

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