

Why families choose toilets – to protect older parents and younger daughters

Why do families build toilets? If the family tradition for many generations has been to defecate in the open – using local woods or accepted sites, then what is the incentive to make a break and opt for a toilet instead?

Concern for daughters and for elderly relatives are two factors often mentioned by families as motivating factors, especially as ‘safe’ places to defecate outside disappear.

In Venkatapuram village in the Kammam District of Andhra Pradesh Suresh added a toilet to his home in the 1990s, mostly because of concern about his mother, Rangamma. “The biggest difficulty was that my mother had to go a long distance to find a place. It was really getting very difficult.”

His mother is delighted to have a safe toilet at home and very proud of her son for building it.

Picture: Suresh and his mother outside their home in Venkatapuram with the toilet that he built



The toilet has needed emptying once, eight years after it was built. Suresh hired a contractor who came with his pumping equipment from 11 kilometres away to empty the pit at a cost of 3,600 rupees (US\$ 78).

Kalyani, is 15-years-old and also lives with her family in Venkatapuram. Her house has a well-built toilet/bathroom in the yard. It is spotlessly clean and there is a new bar of soap in the soap dish inside. Her father built the bathroom when he completed their house seven years ago. Before then all family members had gone to the woods to defecate, but as new homes were built in the village it was getting ever harder to do that.

As modern Indian young women, her friends Jyothsna, 19, and Khaja, 15, also have toilets at home.



Kalyani (centre) with her friends Jyothsna (left) and Khaja (right) at her home.

Kalyani's sparkling clean toilet, with soap ready for use in the bathroom.





In Tulekalan village in Ranga Reddy district only about half the families have toilets and in the poorer parts of the village this falls to 20%. One of the village elders Esari Jangama has one son and two daughters, all married. She has a toilet and bathroom at home and is adamant she would not have let her daughters marry a man who did not provide a toilet in his home. At one time, she says, toilets were exclusively for woman, but now they are for everyone. Both women and men need to keep clean, she says.

Caption: Esari Jangama – my daughters would not marry into a family without toilets

Budhari Adhavla would also very much like to have a toilet for her family, as there is no safe place around Tulekalan for defecation, she says. She is photographed here with her two-year-old son, Bhagath outside the half-built bathroom and toilet that her husband started working on a year ago. As he is a farm labourer and his is the only income coming into the house, there is no money to complete the buildings. They are not usable at present.



Caption: Budhari Adhavla with Bhagath outside the half built toilet and bathroom

Toilets in India are a household responsibility, despite there being a subsidy to families below the poverty line (BPL). However, the Government subsidy for building toilets does not even nearly meet the real cost. The 2700 rupee (US\$ 56) subsidy represents 90% of the Government's norm for the cost of toilets – but this is unrealistic. WASHCost data shows households carry the majority of the costs, spending sums ranging from Rs. 3500 to Rs. 30,000 (US\$ 72-620) including labour. WASHCost is supported by other research carried out for the GoI Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation¹ which shows that in NGP (prize winning) villages across 12 states the mean cost of a toilet was Rs. 7,030 (US\$ 145) of which households paid more than 60%.

Between 2005 and 2007, almost a million individual household toilets were built for families below the poverty line in Andhra Pradesh. However, many toilets are left half built or unused.

There is controversy as subsidies may limit the facilities that poor families can build and inhibit a market in low cost toilets. Whatever view is taken, there is a need for greater clarity. Poor families must still find considerable sums of money themselves, which may lead them to money lenders and unsustainable debt. The Government should consider options for the best use of public money, including the possibility of low interest or no interest loans to replace subsidies. Demand is rising but the true costs of toilets should be recognised.

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¹ CMS. March 2011. Assessment study of impact and sustainability of Nirmal Gram Puraskar. Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation, Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India