

Constructing a New Reality... community toilets that work

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Reality defies the most common image. Excluded communities have exuberant smiles on their faces. There is a new culture in the villages and all families have shifted to new practices. We are not talking about cell phones and colour TVs, the most common gadgets even in poorer rural households. We are talking about toilets and a process of transformation in rural communities.

Nirmal Gram Purashkar (NGP) is an award given to villages which have attained the status of “zero open defecation” (ZOD) and this has triggered a new type of competition between villages in India. Andhra Pradesh is not lagging behind. Several villages, led mainly by the Sarpanch (village president) and members of Gram Panchayat (village council) are making serious efforts to transform their villages to achieve ZOD status. Motivating villagers to construct Individual Sanitary Latrines (ISLs) is a relatively easy task, for which the subsidy provided by the Government of India/ and by Andhra Pradesh state acts as an incentive to construct new toilets at home.

However, it is common knowledge that the construction of ISLs does not automatically mean that they will be used. Surveys and studies indicate that only 10% to 30% of newly constructed toilets are actually used for their supposed purpose, while the rest are used for a variety of unintended purposes such as storing fuel or keeping animals. For many rural families, the toilet is still an alien luxury and using toilets is an alien practice. The cultural shift to this new practice is not easy for a typical villager. Development professionals usually class this as “reluctance” without realising the efforts that are needed to support the process of transformation. The emphasis continues to be on constructing new ISLs.

However, there is also a growing realisation that construction of ISLs for all households is not possible in all villages. There are several hurdles in the way. Many households do not have private tap connections and are dependent on public standposts/ handpumps. Where the village population and housing density are high and land is scarce, many poor and middle

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income families do not have space in their households for toilets. Moreover, poor families do not have surplus income to invest in toilets, required as a matching investment to the Government subsidy. All these families continue to defecate in open spaces.

Many ambitious village leaders are confronted with these problems, for which the given solution is – public community toilets. The “sanitation ladder” theory says that people can graduate from open defecation to use of public toilets and then move on to individual sanitary latrines.

But is this a real solution? The well established fact “...*that the common or public toilets are not properly maintained and they very quickly become dysfunctional...*” questions the appropriateness of such solutions. In fact, these mismanaged public toilets create an image of toilets in the minds of users that is synonymous with dirt, filth and very unpleasant ambiance. Most users are from poor families and they carry this image home and would never want to have a similar facility there. The story of sanitation ladder ends there. Individuals “slip back” to using open spaces for defecation. Given this scenario of the public toilets, policy makers have become convinced that public community toilets cannot help to shift the age-old practice of open defecation. However, an alternative reality is being created in some villages. This article is a journey to two such villages in the West Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh, India that have met these challenges and established themselves as role models.

Pedda Tadepally and Malleshwaram villages have used individual latrines and community options and made them popular and functional. Both villages have high populations (Pedda Tadepally 4,368 people and Malleshwaram 2,804 according to the 2001 census) and did not have any facilities for improving environmental sanitation in the village before 2005. Villagers generally used all the open spaces within and around the village for defecation. All categories of villagers (rich and poor) had this habit and these open spaces were insufficient for the purpose. The approach roads of the villages were used for defecation and any passer-by had to face the discomfort of seeing people doing their business and they were also at risk of stepping in faecal matter. The intensity of the problem grew with time, but no-one acknowledged this as a serious problem, until the local leadership changed during 2006.

Pedda Tadepally:

In August 2006, Mrs. Alapati Nagamani was elected as Sarpanch for Pedda Tadepally. Initially, sanitation was not on the agenda, until students at the engineering college, located at the outskirts of the village, brought this issue to the attention of her husband Mr A. Ramachandra Rao. He became the key person behind the transformation in the village.

The approach road to the college was used for open defecation by villagers. Students were embarrassed to witness this daily act of open defecation and many villagers were also ashamed to see this.

The daughter of the first couple was studying in the same college and she asked her father to take action to stop open defecation in the village. Several college students joined her and met him twice to raise his awareness of this issue. They also offered to make financial contributions towards improving environmental sanitation in the village.

A. Ramachandra Rao began to think about this issue seriously and what he saw made a deep impact on him. The banks of the village pond were also used for open defecation and this was contaminating the drinking water source for the village. .

He was aware that the total sanitation campaign was being implemented on a large scale in the district under the leadership of District Water and Sanitation Mission. He approached their officers and received guidance on how best to launch a sanitation campaign in the village. He organised meetings and motivated villagers to construct individual sanitary latrines in their houses. He also organised the supply of material and skilled labour. He put the construction of toilets in the village on a war footing and personally supervised the construction of 760 individual sanitary toilets. Four months after construction began in 2007, a majority of the families in the village had ISLs. Buoyed up by this success, Mr Ramachandra Rao and the Gram Panchayat members wanted to apply for the Nirmal Gram Purashkar award.

Mr. Ramachandra Rao inspects the toilet block in Pedda Tadepally Village



However, the village was not yet “open defecation free”. About 102, mainly poor families in the village do not have adequate land within their premises to construct toilets. The condition of their houses is also not good enough for the purpose. There were also about 200 migrant families in temporary shelters in the village who could not construct any toilets.

This situation motivated Ramachandra Rao to take a bold step in the village. He spent Rs.3.65 lakhs from Gram Panchayat General Funds to construct two blocks of public toilets in different locations providing easy access for families without toilets at home. The Gram Panchayat also provided water facilities to these toilet blocks and introduced a cleaning and maintenance system. Gram Panchayat staff now clean them properly twice a day. The toilets are given an annual face lift with new whitewash and a maintenance check up. Users are encouraged to wear slippers when they visit the toilets and to wash their hands with soap after defecation. The entire service is free for these poor families. What is more, these toilet blocks are located in beautiful fenced gardens that are meticulously maintained and watered regularly by the Gram Panchayat. This flourishing garden offers a pleasing sight in the village, in contrast to the previous open defecation eyesore.

The Gram Panchayat has also taken care of solid waste management in the village, ensuring regular collection and safe disposal at incineration pits.

In addition, the village now has adequate storage facilities for its domestic water and all households have tap connections. The village water tank was renovated and is fed by canal from Godavari river. The Gram Panchayat spent Rs.48 Lakhs on a system to pump water from the canal to the drinking water pond in the village through closed conduits. The banks of the pond are lined and a strong fence has been erected to protect this common space from misuse, particularly open defecation. The Gram Panchayat provided land and shared the cost of establishing a water

Toilets in the beautiful garden in Pedda Tadepally



Protected water pond in Pedda Tadepally



Incineration pit for solid waste management in Pedda Tadepally



purifying plant in the village with the support of an NGO. A majority of villagers (about 700 families) now get water from this plant.

Pedda Tadepally now stands as a model village in the neighbourhood. Since all the villagers now use private or public toilets, open defecation has stopped completely. The village received the Nirmal Gram Purashkar Award from the Government of India in 2008.

Malleshwaram:

Malleshwaram is a remote village in the district, with a population of 2,804 people and a scarcity of land. All approach roads to the village were used for defecation, and any visitor to the village invariably stepped in faecal matter. When Mrs Ratnamala was elected as Sarpanch of the village in August 2006, she wanted to make a difference. She has been fully supported by her husband, Mr Pattabhi Ramarao.

The first couple learned about the Total Sanitation Campaign, and began to motivate villagers to construct and use toilets. In one month, they facilitated construction of 49 ISLs.

However, they realised that some poor families were not able to construct toilets and not able to visualise the benefits. Mrs Ratnamala understood that these families needed to experience the benefits of using a toilet and that poor families could not really afford to construct a toilet. Under her leadership, the village constructed three blocks of toilets (with separate units for men and women in each block) for families who did not have toilets at home. The cost of each block was about Rs.1.3 lakhs and the Gram Panchayat income at Rs.60,000/- per annum was not enough to cover this, so funds came from the XIIth Finance Commission and other funds of the Gram Panchayat.

Ground water is easily available from nearby handpumps, and the village leaders assumed that the public community toilets would be well used. But this was not the case. Users did not use handpumps and the use of toilets was minimal. To make these facilities more attractive, the Gram Panchayat provided a tap connection to the toilet block from the village storage reservoir and also constructed a storage tank there. They provided electric light at the toilet block so that people could use it at night. The Gram Panchayat now pays a cleaner 2500 Rs/ month to clean the toilet every day. About 150 people now use these toilets

Total Set of Facilities – Toilets, Water Tank, Light, Towel and Soap A Picture Perfect in Malleshwaram



every day.

Although the village has water supply systems including an overhead storage reservoir (OHSR) and most households have access to public standposts, they also depend on open wells in the village. The groundwater is very shallow and each family could comfortably lift water for daily use. There are no individual tap connections. The Gram Panchayat intends to bring household tap connections to all families in the near future. The village has a storage tank with a 90,000 litre capacity under a protected water supply scheme with bore well as source.

To improve the environmental sanitation in the village, the Gram Panchayat also started a system of household garbage collection. A tricycle rickshaw collects from each household at a fee of Rs 10/ family/ month and about 750 families use this facility. The Sarpanch and her husband are appreciated by the women of the village as the facilities helped to make a decisive shift towards total sanitation.

The land on the either side of the approach roads, earlier used for open defecation, has been converted into gardens and plantations. Now visitors are greeted by flowers and green plants instead of heaps of dirt and faecal matter.

What did we learn from these villages?

The leadership in these two villages is with women, both actively supported by their husbands. In Pedda Tadepally, the husband of the Sarpanch is the main driving force behind the transformation. The couples took equal responsibility and played a role in the transformation process. It is very heartening to see women leaders actively engaged with issues of development and contributing effectively to solving critical issues, with the support of their husbands.

The Sarpanches and their husbands took a personal interest in establishing facilities and also in ensuring that these facilities are well used. They regularly visited toilet blocks and personally

Green plants greet today's visitors to Malleshwaram...



Behind every successful woman, there is a man.... Mr. Pattabhi Ramarao supports his wife Mrs. Ratnamala, Sarpanch of Malleshwaram...



supervised the maintenance. This personal touch is an important requirement in the transformation process.

In both cases, the Gram Panchayat made special efforts to reach out to marginalised families and made special efforts to establish community toilet blocks for them. They also ensured that using these toilets has become a pleasant and healthy experience. Water supply, electric light, staff to clean the toilets regularly and annual maintenance of toilet blocks are some of the important responsibilities that the Gram Panchayats undertook.

The Gram Panchayats found adequate financial resources to construct the facilities from the Total Sanitation Campaign; general Gram Panchayat funds and community contributions. They were also able to mobilise financial resources for maintenance, staff salaries and materials. Pedda Tadepally spends Rs.92,000 per annum and Malleshwaram spends Rs.42,000 per annum. Both villages mobilise funds from XIIth Finance Commission and the community.

The sanitation ladder is truly working in Malleshwaram, where families, supported by the Gram Panchayat, are graduating to individual sanitary latrines after experiencing the benefits of the public community toilets. Recently, 10 families moved up from community toilets to ISLs in this village.

In villages where there are large number of poor families, space is scarce and large numbers of migrants live in unauthorised temporary shelters, attaining “zero open defecation” status is a distant dream. These situations demand something more than the same old solutions.

The shift to “zero open defecation” status is a result of intense facilitation and strong local leadership which can motivate community members to think and act differently. The most common failures can also become success stories when local leadership is strong and committed. Community toilet blocks have contributed to a decisive shift in the habits of the rural poor.

Significantly, these leaders are not just interested in getting the award. They are interested in the whole environmental sanitation agenda. Policy makers and administrators have to identify how new evidence is challenging established negative images. New realities are being constructed in Nirmal Gram Purashkar villages. It is important to ensure that these realities are sustained and don't slip back after the glitter of the awards is over.