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ON SANITATION, INDIA IS STILL IN THE DUMPS

Tuesday, 23 February 2016 | Indira Khurana | in Oped



The Modi Government's campaign to end open defecation is welcome but building new toilets alone will not solve the problem

Politically, sanitation is a hot topic but the focus has to shift to the villages. Open defecation is still a common practice in many villages. The plan is to achieve the Clean India target by 2019 to coincide with the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi. Every year, health payments push 60 million Indians below the poverty line. More than 80 per cent of the diseases are linked to poor water supply and sanitation conditions. So, can India really do away with the habit of open defecation?

According to Government data, between now and October 2019, toilets have to be constructed for a whopping 9.1 crore households. That amounts to a target of 228 lakh toilets annually or a daily target of around 62,000 plus toilets. According to Government estimates, in 2014-2015, 0.38 million toilets were constructed. Will this scale of construction be enough? Or will it lead to construction-driven activity alone wherein the money will be spent but the toilets won't be used?

Some of the factors that need to be considered in order to achieve the Swachh Bharat mission are as follows.

First, though crores of toilets need to be constructed, coverage is not the end of the story. Sanitation is about usage. Research reveals that rarely have the two matched. Delving deeper to understand poor usage of toilets has revealed the complexity of issues involved. Convincing people to embrace toilets is difficult. No single approach will bring about conviction for change. A mother in some remote village may construct a toilet to make natural processes easier for her daughter. Elsewhere, health may be the driving factor. This calls for the use of 'different strokes for different folks' approach, so that inhibitions are understood, appreciated and addressed. Spotting and nurturing leadership certainly helps. Sarpanch Duryodhan Sahu gave 'No Shave November or Movember' a new meaning. On November 1, 2014, he publicly took an oath that he would not shave until his nine-revenue panchayat became open-defecation free.

On January 31, 2015, Kumurisingha Panchayat in Angul district of Odisha turned open-defecation free. Saraswati Pradhan from nearby Chediapada Panchayat is another leader who took on her family members and forced them to fall in line. She threatened to shine a torch on them while they defecated in the open, unless they reformed themselves. She is currently the proud sanitation ambassador of Odisha. Rural India is dotted with such leaders. Discovering them and spreading the word about their feats can inspire many others.

The second issue is the quality of construction. While some toilets have beautiful exteriors, they are empty inside. In others, the slope of the pan is wrong, or there is no space to squat. Norms need to be followed. Availability of water is the third issue. If water has to be brought from a distance, it is an additional burden on the women and girls. Without water, the toilets are unusable.

Fourth, a lack of total solutions. Safe sanitation is more than defecating in a safe environment. It is also about operation and maintenance of toilets and safe disposal of fecal sludge. Users are often perplexed as to how to dispose off the waste — both liquid and solid. In the absence of support for operation and maintenance, toilets become unusable. Either the toilets become defunct or the waste water spills over.

Solutions for the safe disposal of fecal sludge when the pits become full need to be made available. Private service providers with mechanised systems can provide cleaning services. The waste collected needs to be disposed safely, for which land needs to be provided. Alternately, the waste can be disposed in existing sewage treatment plants. But the costs need to be worked out.

Fifth, availability of skilled masons and hardware is also a concern. One of the major deterrents to toilet construction is the absence of supply chains providing necessary hardware and construction support. Information on suitable hardware choices, and masons who can construct toilets are not easily available. The deplorable state of sanitation has turned large swathes of the rural landscape into a dump, a slang

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(The writer is Policy Lead: Food Security, Resource Scarcity and Climate Change with IPE Global)

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