

Some months back, Ashok Vihar jhuggi dwellers in Delhi converged on the north-west district police commissioner's office and protested against the ban on their right to defecate in the open. These jhuggi dwellers have no other place to defecate except the space around the park surrounding the DDA colonies. The stench for those living in the DDA flats adjoining the park prompted them to complain to the DDA which constructed a 1-km long wall to keep them away. However, the wall was breached a number of times over the months. The police were called, some arrests, were made but to no avail. The problem persisted and ultimately the residents went to the court which ruled that the jhuggi dwellers be prevented from defecating in the open. "Where should we defecate? Nobody is interested to answer this question. Courts cannot unfortunately adjudicate on where to defecate. Courts can at best stop them for a day. But next morning they have to answer the call of nature somewhere in some space! There cannot be any contempt of court if the ban orders of the court are disobeyed." This is just not an environmental problem but a biological and physical problem too and it is unfortunate that no serious efforts are made by the policy makers to address these environmental sanitation issues. The agony of Ashok Vihar jhuggi dwellers is just a symbolic manifestation of the acute problem of environmental sanitation in the country.

Hundreds of men, women and children in the country keep defecating in the open — all along the highways, railway lines, airport routes, open grounds/spaces. Women are the worst sufferers. They have to wait all the time to defecate either after sunset or before sunrise. In the villages during the rains the

Right to Defecate

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situation gets worse. When crops are standing and fields are muddy, people come out to defecate on the road side. Women getting up when vehicles pass is a familiar sight in the countryside. Once, when Prince Charles visited Madhya Pradesh, he was escorted by a young collector and by the time he reached his rest house it was dark. All along the route he saw women getting up when his car passed through. He asked the collector why they were getting up. The collector replied, "Sir, they were all waiting to see you since morning and when they saw your car they got up to get a glimpse of you." The Prince replied, "I am so sorry I kept them waiting. Please convey my apologies."

This is how we are fooling others and ourselves. How long do we have to wait to provide a leach pit toilet to every family in the country? The task is daunting and difficult both in rural and urban slums. The total rural population in 1991 census was 627.1

million, just 10% of the rural families have what are called safe sanitation facilities. This would mean that 112.9 million rural households are yet to be provided with basic sanitation facilities. That means they are defecating out somewhere! Even at a modest cost of Rs. 2500 for a leach pit latrine, which does not need flush of water, but just pour flush, we need a a gigantic investment of Rs 28,255 crores. According to the National Seminar on Rural Sanitation, 16-18 September, 1992, Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, New Delhi: "If a contribution of 20% of the cost by the beneficiaries is assumed, the investment on the part of the government would be about Rs 22,580 crore. Such a huge investment will be obviously beyond the means of the centre and state governments in the foreseeable future." Only 250 of the 3500 cities and small towns of India are equipped with adequate drainage facilities. Consequently in sanitary conditions prevail. Normal urban toilets require an average of thirty gallons of water, which is just not possible to provide given the acute shortage of even drinking water. How can we, then, solve this problem of human waste disposal?

One relatively inexpensive and effective solution is the marketing of the leach pit or pour flush (PF) toilet technology, which consumes just 1.5 to 2 litres of water. The government of India has popularised these PF latrines but they have not marketed them aggressively. In states with the efforts of like Gujarat, the legendary Ishwarbhai Patel who is popularly



known as Mr. Toilet, these PF toilets have been aggressively marketed. I am emphasizing the marketing approach because the government building of toilets through contractors involves subsidy to the beneficiary, which mostly ends up on paper and not on the ground. Marketing a PF toilet can be done easily. It is a convenient product and has to be marketed as a user-friendly toilet. If Gujarat can do it why not other states? The most important components of a PF toilet are the trap, the squatting pan, the foot-rest, the leaching pit or the honey-combed pit and the superstructure. In the minds of a poor family, a toilet means a luxury and our public health engineers have kept the PF toilet technology as a mystery. That is why it has to be marketed by a street-smart salesperson. If our jhuggi dwellers can install a colour television, they would definitely love to have their 'own' PF toilets. Mr Ishwarbhai has built toilets in slums, where one tailor has a PF toilet in the sitting room where he works on his tailoring machine. When he wants to defecate, he puts his tailoring machine a side, completes his shitting and puts back the machine on the top to start the stitching!

Over the last few years many have started manufacturing traps and pans—Gwalior Potteries in Gwalior, Shital Sanitary Sales in Ahmedabad, a ceramic factory in Morvi and a fibre glass factory in Rajasthan and Saniplast in Delhi. The pioneering work done by Ramakrishna Mission in Midnapur in West Bengal for popularising PF latrines is noteworthy. There are many such experiments but the aggressive marketing is missing in many of these. The main culprit in poor marketing is the state housing agencies. Look at all rural houses built under Indira Awas Yojana. They

never planned a leach pit latrine along with the house. They presumed that the poor occupant does not need a toilet and all the Indira Awas Yojana occupants were forced to go out and defecate! Many of these houses are now crumbling and the people are taking out the doors and window frames to make money. Similarly look at our schools and health centres. Urinals and toilets are never designed and provided when they are built.

PF toilets need little masonry skill. We do not need architects and engineers to build them. In Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, thousands of village *mistris* have been trained to build PF toilets. Some women *mistris*

have also taken up the work of building PF latrines. The best salesmen would be the village masons. In our Indian villages any villager who wants to build a house, repair a house or a cattleshed or a house roof, the first to be called is the village mason.

Any company interested in the toilet business can appoint these village masons as their sales force. The business can fetch high returns since only systematic marketing can sell good sanitation practices and not government sponsored latrine programmes. Unfortunately private entrepreneurs are not getting into the business on a big scale. It is high time sanitation business gets the attention of young entrepreneurs and village youths.