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Ashamed to be Indian

Research reveals that our toilet habits have more to do with the social acceptance of public defecation and misconceptions of public hygiene than poverty

Every year when the United Nations releases its report on the measurement of human development I feel a little ashamed to be Indian. I have been following it for at least ten years now and have to sadly report that in terms of human development India continues to be almost exactly where it was ten years ago and the problem is not money but a sad absence of political will to make real changes in our approach to what we loosely call the social sector.

The statistic that depressed me most about the Human Development Report, released by the UNDP (UN Development Program) last week, was that one in three Indians lacks access to a toilet. Depressing but hardly a surprise. As V.S. Naipaul pointed out more than forty years ago 'Indians defecate everywhere'.

Those were days of Nehruvian socialism and passionate nationalism and we hated Naipaul for forcing us to see what we did not want to. We blamed our filthy habits on our poverty and we blamed that on the British Raj (not our bad economic policies) and carried on defecating everywhere.

Potty poor

What annoys me about the Human Development report is that it also blames our absence of potty training on poverty. Maybe the writers of the report are being politically correct or patronising but it would help if they stopped. It would also help if they travelled around in rural India a little and gave us a list of those villages in which every home has a private toilet that has been built at almost no cost. When I last checked three years ago it cost Rs 12,000 to build an efficient, rural toilet.

It would be even better if the Minister of Rural Development or Panchayati Raj did the toilet tour instead because he would discover how easy it is for India to be rid of more than eighty percent of our health problems. We have a sickeningly high infant mortality rate and our babies die mostly of diseases caused by the absence of clean water and clean toilet habits. More than eighty percent of diseases in India are caused by public defecation and primitive ideas of public hygiene. As someone who lives part time in a village I have done some rudimentary research on the subject and found that our toilet habits have more to do with the social acceptance of public defecation and misconceptions of public hygiene than poverty.

The residents of the seaside village in which I live are not poor. They are mostly middle class with middle class aspirations. The houses in which they live are all 'pucca' and clean with tiled roofs and charming verandahs. Many have small gardens planted with hibiscus and bougainvillea, nearly every home has access to cable TV and consumer goods and all kitchens are indoors and spotlessly clean but almost not a single house has an indoor toilet.

The beach is the village toilet. Villagers who balk at the sight of women in shorts and swimsuits have no problem with their women squatting along the beach in full view of visiting tourists from the city. Men are even less embarrassed about exposing themselves and squat happily on the edge of the ocean so that they are saved the need to carry a 'lota'. Public defecation is such an acceptable social habit that it continues despite the village having aspirations to become a seaside resort. Little hotels have sprung up in village homes offering 'clean' rooms for rent and on weekends a nightclub with fairy lights and disco music springs up on the beach where tourists from Mumbai dance to the sounds of Bollywood. But, nobody appears to notice that there would be many more tourists if the beach was not a minefield of human excrement.

In this column I have written before about a Dalit woman called Chhaya Kamble who ensured during her tenure as 'sarpanch' that every home in the village of Malwadi near Sangli built a private toilet. She did this by making public defecation socially unacceptable. Children are fined Rs 100 if they try to do their business in the village streets and adults Rs 500. The result of this campaign is that there has been a hundred percent drop in the incidence of disease in Malwadi and it has become an inspiration to neighbouring villages.

Unaddressed issue

The only thing that prevents a nationwide campaign along Malwadi lines is that we do not have a single national or state level leader who is prepared to address the issue. Not many of us in the media talk about it either because we prefer to close our eyes to the ugly reality that Indians

continue to defecate everywhere. According to the Human Development Report access to a flush toilet reduced infant mortality by 59% in Peru and 57% in Egypt. Do we need a more compelling reason to demand a nationwide campaign?

Cable TV has made hundreds of channels available in nearly all of rural India so a campaign by the Health Ministry against public defecation should be the easiest thing to organize. What about doing something before the next Human Development Report?

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