

Waging war on tradition: Flushing out manual scavenging

At the inaugural session of conference of state minister of welfare and social justice held on 17th June 2011 the Hon'ble Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh in New Delhi said...

"One of the darkest blots on our development process is that even after 64 years of independence, we still have the heinous practice of manual scavenging. The success of inclusive growth would be measured by the succor provided to 'Our sisters and brothers' from the weakest section of the society ... The conversion of dry latrines must be completed once and for all."

In the year 2010, available data, government or non-government, showed that manual scavengers and dry toilets had almost vanished. The Census data set published in 2011 was an eye opener: 20 lacs dry latrines existed in India.

Introduction of the Problem

Monsoon had long departed and farmers across the fertile plain were preparing their fields to sow wheat when Mr. A joined as the district magistrate (DM) of Ruhel, a mostly rural district on the north bank of the spreading Ganga. The district had a population of around 35 lacs, a mix of all castes and people predominantly Hindu and Muslim. Within a few days, during his inspection of villages and Nagar Palikas/Nagar Panchayats at various places the sight of clouds of flies disconcerted the new DM. Flies were everywhere; they attended the district magistrate's village meetings, interjected in the discussions with their loud buzzing, hovered over the cups of tea and snacked on the biscuits.

At the district headquarters, during the initial 5-6 months of his tenure, representatives from the World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF and NGOs came to meet him regarding various issues. All of them invariably reported that the villages of this district seemed to be very dirty and unclean. Mr. A had been the district magistrate of several other districts. His response to these visitors was to that the villages in this district had as good, or a better, drainage system and brick roads as many other districts in which he had served, so why was this district different? But during discussions no one could clearly point out why the villages and towns were so filthy. Although the DM asked his colleagues about it and sought ways of controlling the menace, no immediate solution suggested itself. Anti-fly fogging with the help of spray machines was one idea that came up, but the appropriate machinery was not available on the

scale necessary to cover the many villages. It was also not clear whether this measure would provide relief.

And wherever he ventured in certain areas of the otherwise agriculturally prosperous district masses of flies greeted the new district magistrate.

Extent of the problem

After around eight months, one day the District Panchayati Raj Officer (DPRO), a forty-something man who had recently joined the district, came to meet the DM. In the course of the discussion, the serious-faced officer dropped a bombshell: although the official report submitted to Government stated that there were no dry latrines in the rural area, the district still had a large number of dry latrines. At the same time he admitted that since dry latrines had been banned by Parliamentary legislation, The Employment of Manual Scavengers & Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act 1993, it was imperative to take action on this issue. To lend matters further urgency, a public interest litigation (PIL) was being heard in the Hon. Supreme Court on this issue, which was being monitored regularly. The DPRO – who was the nodal officer for the Total Sanitation Program was unable to clarify the extent of the problem – no figures were available either about the number of dry latrines in the district or the scavengers who serviced them! However, he informed the DM that in two villages he had initiated the process of conversion of dry latrines into pour & flush toilets. To give this process a momentum he sought support of the district magistrate. Grappling with numerous development programs, the DM assured him of support.

Within a few days when the DPRO returned to the DM seeking his guidance, the district magistrate decided that he needed to take this up urgently. He planned that in each development block 3-4 villages would be selected for conversion of dry latrines; the few left out would be taken up afterwards. Along with the conversion of dry latrines, a cleanliness drive in the villages would also be undertaken so that the DM's earlier concern about the fly menace could also be addressed. He reasoned that selecting 3-4 villages in each development block would have its own benefit since it would be easier to closely monitor it through the team of Block Development Officers.

Ramzanpur was one of the villages selected. At first only about six hundred dry latrines could be identified here; later it turned out that the village actually had more than twice the number. This was the first village that the DM visited during this campaign. Preparatory to the DM's visit the block development officer and the DPRO deployed sanitation workers from other villages to this village and made the village clean. A few drains were repaired and the conversion of a few toilets was also started.

The DM had planned to assess the impact of the work in progress and also to build awareness among the people of the village about general sanitation and hygiene through a meeting. This was a big village and since the sanitation and health related works had already been initiated in the villages, a large number of people gathered for the meeting. Yet, as it emerged in the course of the meeting, the level of satisfaction among the community appeared to be low; general feeling of dissatisfaction was apparent during the walk the DM took through the village after the meeting. The villagers mentioned other problems besetting their village. They demanded regular electricity supply, more BPL cards and more Indira Awas houses. Sanitation was not a priority in the village. Regarding the conversion of dry latrines, some folks only said that the monetary support of Rs. 1500 given to convert a dry latrine was just not enough and some of them had even earlier expressed their anger in this regard to the village level workers.

During the walk through the village the DM stopped at one of the dry latrines and peeped inside - only to recoil in horror and dismay. He had never seen a dry latrine before; what he saw was unimaginable. Inside the dingy little cubicle was a latrine in which lay piles of human excreta; crowds of flies buzzed and feasted upon it. The foul smell from the toilet eddied around the house and into the street. Toilets in other houses were in the same condition. To make matters worse, many of them were situated just beside the kitchen. The DM noticed that some of the drains in the village were choked with human excreta. It struck him that he had seen such drains earlier too but had not realized then why this was so. This visit was an eye opener for the district magistrate; now he knew why these villages were filthy and swarming with flies. The biggest challenge before him now was how to overcome the problem.

The Initial Campaign

Shaken by the reality of district the DM called a special meeting of the officials that included BDOs, officers of the Health, Education, ICDS, Jal Nigam, PDS, and related departments and other senior district level officers such as the chief development officer (CDO) and additional district magistrates (ADMs). Through this meeting the DM wanted to give momentum to the drive for the conversion of dry latrines. He realized nothing less than a campaign would do. He also wanted to share with the officers what had seen. Another objective that the DM sought to pursue was to converge all schemes pertaining to health, education, sanitation, drinking water, women and child health etc. in the target villages so that the villagers could feel that something was being done for their benefit and the resistance shown by them towards the conversion of toilets and the preoccupation with the small amount being given for the purpose could be minimized.

During the presentations, some of the speakers from the Panchayati Raj department were able to graphically project the picture of the unhygienic conditions and dangers to health in the

villages where human excreta lay exposed for hours in the house, and were sometimes channeled into the drains. Most officers agreed that this condition was the reason why the district was a hot spot for polio with one of the highest number of polio cases in the country. They also appreciated the difficulty in controlling the intermittent outbreak of diarrhea and other diseases in the villages. The gathered officers also heard about people, mostly women including minor girls, officially called Manual Scavengers who carried human excreta from these toilets, and how detrimental such a practice is to health, dignity, human freedom and human rights. The entire family of the Manual Scavenger had to live all their lives with low self-esteem, experience physical and social segregation and untouchability. Many officers found it difficult to believe that such primitive conditions of hygiene could exist or that there could be such an 'occupation' even in current times.

By the end of the presentations about the plight of manual scavengers and the health hazards of dry latrines and the uninhibited discussion that followed everyone present appeared to be shaken; they agreed that this was the darkest blot on the face of the district and something concrete should urgently be done about it. A consensus emerged that instead of spending time on the survey of dry latrines it would be best to start the conversion of dry latrines immediately (later on this decision proved right as many districts could not complete the survey even after a year, not to speak of in months) in this district. As the work progressed in the selected villages more and more villages with dry latrines started coming to lights. In his concluding remarks the DM appealed to the officers present, 'Please do not take this up only as implementation of another government program but as a mission. Such an opportunity, to do something substantial for the benefit of the most deprived sections of the society comes once in a lifetime. Let's not lose it.'

Dealing with Road Blocks

- Involving the affected

The meeting had been a learning experience for the DM also. Not only did he learn from the speeches of the experts on the subject, he also noted the impact of the presentations on the gathered officers. He realized that a primary requirement for his campaign to succeed was greater awareness among the people; it was imperative that they recognized dry latrines to be a hazard. The DM was convinced that just as the officers had been sensitized, with effective communication the community at large could also be made aware so that they convert the toilet not to avail of the financial aid but also to live in a healthy environment. Therefore, he decided that to this end there should be a series of public meetings in every village. Along with the experts, the DM himself attended many of these meetings and spoke to the people. They developed and asked hard hitting questions like 'have you ever eaten human excreta'; 'will you

handle human excreta even if given Rs.1000; and, 'even beggars are better than you'. Yet since dry latrines had been in use for ages, it was going to take time to convince people to discard their use.

The biggest hurdle was the huge amount of money demanded by the community to convert the dry latrines to pour flush latrines. Initially, each family could be provided with Rs. 1500/- as an incentive. Even at this rate the fund available was not only meager but had also been distributed in small amounts among villages across the district. To consolidate his resources, the DM decided that these amounts, released to villages in previous years but lying unspent, should be withdrawn to the district headquarters and allocated afresh on priority to villages selected for dry latrine conversion. DPRO and his somewhat expert team demonstrated that the existing super structure such as the roof and walls of the existing dry toilets could be put to use. Few toilets constructed to show people that it was possible to convert the dry latrine with limited resources to kick-start the campaign in the village. People asked how the small pit toilet could be expected to last for 4-5 years; they were told that since the heap of excreta on the outskirts of village was not as huge as a two storied house, it indicated that excreta decompose fast.

- Educating the educated ...

Most people in the district were neither aware of the ill effects of the dry latrines nor about its legal aspects. During a discussion with a senior political leader - known to be reasonably well-off - the district magistrate was surprised to learn that even the leader's family used a dry latrine at home. The DM was further astonished when the political leader even demanded that he also be given the financial incentive for converting the dry latrine in his house! During village visits the DM also discovered that functionaries of various government departments were also using dry latrines in their homes!

Clearly, if government workers and functionaries did not themselves use a pour & flush toilet they would not be able to motivate others. With this insight, through the district level officers of various departments, the district magistrate directed that government workers and related functionaries like ASHA, Anganwadi Workers, Shiksha Mitra, Sweeper, Lekhpal, ration dealers, and rozgar sewaks should do away with the dry latrines in their houses and instead construct pour & flush latrines; this direction also applied to those who were habituated to open defecation. Soon district level and block level officers of these departments told the DM that they were facing difficulties as they could not punish workers who did not obey the orders. They were told to use informal methods to accomplish the task. Senior officers conducted meetings with these employees and workers at the block level; it was also ensured that these

workers participated in all awareness generation meetings held in the villages. At every departmental meetings comprising village level workers, it was made mandatory to discuss the issue. Ultimately, during the entire campaign period the number of pour & flush toilets constructed by government functionaries exceeded 7000.

Initially, it was necessary to select a few people who could be convinced easily to promote pour & flush toilets. The obvious choice was people who were educated and had a good economic standing in the village and persons who were in some way related to the government machinery. Simultaneously, as decided earlier the awareness campaign was also kick-started in each village. Led by the district magistrate, district and sub-district level officers down to BDOs conducted village level meetings. . By the time the campaign came to an end, more than 500 village level awareness generation meetings had been held in the district. The rallies, talks on sanitation and hygiene in schools, wall writing about the impact of dry latrines on health and also about the prohibition act, and the cleanliness drives created a buzz among the people of villages: something was happening in their village

- **Tasting success Rolling out the campaign to other villages**

As the campaign went ahead, information flowed into the DM's office about several other villages with dry latrines; within two months the number of villages, in which the work of conversion was started, doubled. In the office of the DPRO and in various Block Development Offices there were workers and officers who made an extra effort just because the result of their efforts was immediate and visible. One of these officers began a blog on the internet and started posting photographs, updates of work in progress and decisions of meetings held. When the blog was shown in the district level meeting, the BDOs who saw their pictures on the Blog felt elated. The DPRO also began collecting the progress report from the villages and e-mailed it daily to the District Magistrate.

As many more villages with dry latrines came to light, newspapers also started reporting on the left-out villages. Six months into the campaign, 80 percent of the villages had been identified and the final figure stood at almost 50,000 dry latrines spread over more than 500 villages across the district. By now the work being done was reported in the national media. One morning it was reported in one of the most prominent national daily and district officials felt elated for next 15 days.

Although a lot of work remained to be done, the DM was facing a shortage of funds. The number of villages had grown considerably and district and block level officers were finding it difficult to effectively monitor the selected villages. As the volume of work grew the DM found

that the existing workforce was not only insufficient but was beginning to show signs of fatigue. To begin with, the BDOs and the Gram Panchayat Secretaries had been given the responsibility to monitor the progress. However, since each village secretary had to monitor 5-6 villages, the supervisory officials were spread very thin. They also complained that other work was suffering. Meanwhile the DM found out that the Block motivators engaged under Total Sanitation Campaign (TSC) were getting additional 5000 Rs. Per month support from UNICEF Block. Some BDOs had started using village level motivators effectively. Soon these village level motivators began sending daily reports and the DM started communicating directly with the Block motivators also. During the campaign period of one year there were times when the entire government machinery was engaged in major administrative exercises activities like Panchayat elections or natural calamities like floods that disrupted the development activities in the district. During these periods greater reliance was put on the Motivators; they did not let the momentum of the campaign go down.

At this time, the village level teams also started to take proper shape and gain strength. The village level team primarily comprised the Village Pradhan, Gram Panchayat Secretary and various village level workers like lekhpal, rozgar sewak, sweeper, ASHA, Ration Dealer, Para Teachers, and Anganwadi Workers. The majority of these persons were from the same village. By this time the members of this team were themselves aware of the importance of the campaign and had constructed a latrine in their houses.

One day the district magistrate visited a few villages where the progress was very slow. In one of these villages he noticed that the Gram Pradhan was a very active person. Addressing him the DM remarked upon the foul smell that seemed to envelope the village. After the DM's speech the Pradhan held a discussion with the villagers and assured the DM that all dry latrines in the village would be converted to pour & flush within a month. The DM appreciated him in front of all present to motivate him. While leaving the village the District Magistrate separately told the Block Development Officer that there was no need to devote extra time to this village as the Pradhan himself was aware and enthusiastic. Since he was a popular leader, he would be able to keep his promise with the help of other government functionaries. The Pradhan kept his promise.

In another village it was found that people who had dry latrines in their houses did not turn up for the meeting. Moreover, government employees and associated functionaries from that village did not have dry latrines in their houses. The Panchayat secretary informed the DM that the few people who had earlier received the incentive amounting to Rs 1500/- had misused it for other purposes. The chances for making headway in this village appeared bleak. On the verge of leaving the village, as he was about to sit in the car, an idea came to DM's mind. He called the village Lekhpal standing nearby and asked him that out of the list of the 100

odd people who used dry toilets could be motivated at least five or six families with his influence and relations with them. The Lekhpal, a cautious old man, asked leave for one day to reply. After 3-4 days when DM inquired from the concerned Block development Officer he informed that the Lekhpal has managed to influence 4-5 people and they had started construction. Soon this village also went on the right course of conversion.

Every village was a separate world; each had its own configuration of economic, social, and educational conditions. Hence, it was evident that planning for conversion of dry latrines would bear better results and would also reduce the burden of senior officers if each village was considered individually. The focus of conversion also shifted from providing financial incentive to motivation. Apart from awareness generation other approaches to improve motivation were also attempted. In one meeting a BDO informed the DM about a Gram Pradhan who was not cooperating; he ran a business of seeds and fertilizer. There was another Pradhan who was engaged in the liquor business. The District Agriculture Officer and the District Excise Officer were roped in to elicit their active participation. Soon afterwards these Pradhans became enthusiastic champions of the program. In one of the villages a lady Pradhan adopted a very innovative idea. To the poor families she provided work under MNREGA so that they could earn some money and invest in toilets. Seeing the work done by these village representatives the DM called frequent meetings of gram Pradhans where he also honored the Pradhans doing good work. Some Pradhans were so highly motivated that they helped in conversion by investing their own money.

Highlighting their plight of Manual Scavengers

- ‘A New Beginning...’

Much before this, while the campaign went underway and some villages saw substantial conversion of dry latrines, one aspect, which had initially been secondary to toilet conversion, had come to the forefront: the plight of the manual scavengers and their family members numbering around 15000. Cleaning the dry latrines and carrying human excreta on their head had been their sole livelihood; for this demeaning work they received either a few rupees or a few ‘rotis.’ After the program of conversion gathered speed they could not get even this measly remuneration for in some villages now there were no dry latrines to clean. Their livelihood had become a question mark.

Inevitably, in a few places the affected manual scavengers staged demonstrations and road blockades. During the awareness meetings in villages they questioned the officials about their future and also registered their protest. In many villages manual scavenger women seeking a resolution of their predicament surrounded the DM. One day the leaders from the Balmiki community, to which the manual scavengers belonged, met the DPRO regarding the

problems of sweepers working in government departments. Taking this as an opportunity the DPRO apprised them of the dry latrines conversion program. He also briefed them about the drive being undertaken to rehabilitate of manual scavengers in the district and sought their support. The leaders of the Balmiki community readily pledged their support and also affirmed that they themselves had tried many times to end this traditional work associated with their community. Due to societal pressure and lack of support from administration they had failed. The DPRO took them to the DM who could see their enthusiasm for the way out of their condition.

The manual scavengers were provided with a poster designed especially for them that was named 'Naya Savera', 'A New Morning' or 'New Beginning'. This became their banner and rallying point. The leaders of the Balmiki community carried the poster from one village to another to generate awareness among the manual scavengers. They appealed to members of their community to take an oath never to carry out manual scavenging again. When they informed the DM that due to lack of mobility they could not travel to distant villages they were provided with a vehicle by the DPRO from the TSC fund. While they raised the awareness level of their own community, these leaders also insisted on quick rehabilitation by the district administration.

Their rightful due ... Details about Rehabilitation

When the DM reviewed the former attempts to rehabilitate manual scavenger she found that according to the focus of government policy the previous efforts to rehabilitate manual scavengers had been restricted to giving loans to them. And the majority of the manual scavengers had already availed of loans under the scheme. Yet, to run a business with the small amounts loaned was by itself a daunting proposition; this was compounded by the fact that they were manual scavengers in a society that unsparingly practiced untouchability. Little wonder, therefore, business for them had proved an impossible alternative! Now for most of them no scheme was available but pressure for their rehabilitation was mounting.

Slowly the DM together with his officers started to discover the facilities which could be provided to erstwhile manual scavengers. The first, and obvious, choice was MNREGA. Job cards were made for manual scavengers and they were given work under the programme. To provide immediate relief, new items of work were initiated under MNREGA in villages with a concentration of manual scavengers. Every family of manual scavengers was given a BPL or an Antyodaya card. Since for this purpose there was no new target, first in the village itself and then in the entire block the ineligible cardholders were identified; their cards were cancelled and given to manual scavengers. Going a step further, the district administration carried out a

survey of the children of manual scavengers who were then admitted to schools. They were awarded a special scholarship, which previously had not been given only because reports already dispatched to the Government had claimed that there were no manual scavengers in the district. Since the contagion of untouchability was widespread, efforts were made to monitor that children were not discriminated against, but sat together in the class and had the mid-day meal along with other children.

With every alternate meeting newer benefits were incorporated for them. They were brought within the ambit of various pension schemes, the Indira Awas Yojna and the state government's rural housing scheme, the urban housing scheme and loans. While the conversion of dry latrines was going on there was a shortage of trained masons. Using this opportunity, the family members of the manual scavengers were also trained as masons; this served to provide them work while making them pro-active participants in their own social upliftment. They were also given financial support to construct a toilet in their own house. Later on manual scavengers were also covered under skill development programs.

In a village one day a manual scavenger told the village worker that she suffered from a skin disease. During the ensuing discussions it was found that many of them suffered from some form of skin disease due to the pestilential nature of their work; this was one of the reasons why other sections of the population treated them as untouchables. This discovery prompted the establishment of special health camps for these women. All health related benefits were provided to them through the camps in villages and Block Offices so that scavengers could be confident that the district administration was truly sincere about assisting them to give up the scavenging work. In fact many of these had long wanted to abandon this work, but people who used dry latrines in their houses had ensured that they did not stop serving them. Moreover, worries about their future had prevented them from leaving this work.

When the manual scavengers stopped working in a few villages the users of dry latrines staged demonstrations - their latrines were not cleaned for days. At many places they also tried to force the manual scavengers to re-start the work of manual scavenging. Many a times this created an apprehension in the DM's mind that such rapid social change may create social conflict.

The Symbolic Burning

The DM was convinced that, along with giving up their degrading work, it was also important for the scavengers to counter the hegemony of the users of dry latrines and to destroy the legitimacy that the society has given to manual scavenging through centuries of oppression. The cruel system had inculcated in the manual scavengers the belief that "Daliya

Hamne Puja Mein Lee Thi “ (We have taken up the basket as a form of worship!). Hence, the DM felt that a powerful symbolic gesture was also needed to liberate manual scavengers not just physically and economically but also psychologically. The wicker baskets and brooms, which were used to collect and carry human excreta, were the primary symbols of slavery and marked the scavenger’s identity. Hence, it was decided to collect the baskets and the brooms and as a final “NO” to manual scavenging in a village, burn them; the manual scavengers burnt them in front of everybody, including the presence of officials. This ‘ceremony’ came to be known as ‘Dalia Jalao’.

One day there was a picture in a newspaper in which Daliya Jalao was shown but no senior officer was present. Only scavengers, the village secretary and other people were there; they were all smiling. And they had lifted the Gram Pradhan up in their arms. It was a bonfire celebrating the freedom of manual scavengers.

The conversion of dry latrines finally was completed, but the real economic and social rehabilitation of the manual scavengers is going to take time. The DM issued appreciation letters to BDO’s who completed the conversion work in their blocks so that they would take up the task of rehabilitation more enthusiastically.

“Ham bhi achchha business karna chahte hain, achchha khana chahte hain, achchha pahanna chahte hain, Daliya se chutti nahin milee kahan se kuchha karte....aba kama kar kya kareng badi mushkil se peechha chhota” {We also want to do good business, eat better, dress better, but because of Daliya how could we have done anything....why should we return to manual scavenging? We have got rid of it after much agony} and “Ab hamain jhadu bhi nahin lagani wahin ke wahin phir aa jayenge”{Now we won’t even sweep.otherwise, we’ll return to square one} were some of the words which manual scavengers said to independent agencies visiting.

One and a half years after the transfer from the district, the DM had an opportunity to visit a few villages. He found former dry toilet users fully satisfied with their new toilets. Former manual scavengers told that attitude of the villagers towards them have changed remarkably. Some former manual scavengers complained about not getting their due. Most of them demanded government jobs. When DM inquired about their previous work they told

“Agar ghar mein koi mara pada ho tab bhi kamane jana padta tha (We were forced to go cleaning latrines even if someone in the family had died and his dead body was lying in house). They asserted that they would never go back to it.

