

Freedom from Open Defecation Role of the Community

NITIN DHAKTODE

Open defecation is a major health hazard and causes enormous hardship, especially to rural women. Government funds for constructing toilets have to be supplemented with awareness campaigns to motivate ordinary people to do their part. Sarola, a village in Maharashtra, was able to become “open defecation free” with effective community participation, taking advantage of the Sant Gadgebaba Gram Swachhata Abhiyan. Toilets were built in every house, along with systematic management of solid waste. The village testifies to the larger social benefits that can come from the efforts of a group of determined youth.

The author would like to thank Swati Banerjee, Dnyaneshwar Bansode, Jean Drèze, Reetika Khera, Sowmya Kidambi, Sudhir Maske and Ashwini Survase for their support and encouragement.

Nitin Dhaktode (nitin.tiss@gmail.com) is presently working in the Society for Social Audit Accountability and Transparency, Department of Rural Development, Government of Andhra Pradesh.

Statements by two heavyweight politicians (Jairam Ramesh and Narendra Modi) suggesting that toilets are more important to India than temples have attracted a lot of attention. They provided an opportunity for a well-informed debate on issues related to sanitation in the country, including why India is lagging behind even its poorer neighbour Bangladesh. For instance, Drèze and Sen (2013: 63) point out that the proportion of households with access to toilets in Bangladesh is 92% compared to 45% in India. Spears, Ghosh and Cumming (2013) find that more than 70% of households in India defecate in the open. The failure to effectively contain and manage human excreta is associated with a wide range of health problems and a large disease burden (Prüss-Üstün et al 2008).

Clearly, sanitation is one of the most important areas where effective government intervention is required today. In 1999, the Central Rural Sanitation Programme (CRSP) was reintroduced as the Total Sanitation Campaign (TSC), and it is also known as the Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan (NBA). The government introduced a cash prize for villages that became fully “open defecation free” (ODF). After the launch of the TSC, state governments initiated their own programmes. For instance, the Government of Maharashtra introduced the Sant Gadgebaba Gram Swachhata Abhiyan (SGGSA). The SGGSA was launched along with other innovative ideas such as community participation through sub-programmes like Shahu,

Phule and the Ambedkar Dalit Wasti Swachhata Abhiyan (SFADWSA), all under the umbrella of the NBA.

This article is on Sarola village (in Tuljapur block of Osmanabad district, Maharashtra) that took an initiative for its sustainable development with the help of government agencies and succeeded in establishing a new identity for the village. It discusses how various factors, especially community organisation and community action, enabled Sarola to become ODF.

Profile of Sarola

Sarola is a small village with 1,032 inhabitants (Sarola ICDS Survey Report 2013), of whom 75% are dalits (scheduled castes), Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and the *vimukta* jati nomadic tribes (VJNT), and 25% from other castes. It is 9 km from Tuljapur block. Apart from agriculture (the main source of livelihood), another important source of livelihood is construction work in surrounding villages and at the block. Almost 40% of the population belongs to the Wadar community (VJNT), whose main source of livelihood is stone-cutting and construction. Only five residents of Sarola are government employees. Education facilities are poor. There is only one primary school, and students go to Malumbra village (8 km away) or Tuljapur (9 km away) after their schooling there.

About SGGSA

The SGGSA was launched in 2000 in the name of Sant Gadge Baba, a 19th century folk hero who inspired people with his philosophy of self-reliance, community-sharing, and village cleanliness. Sanitation was the focus of his spiritualism, speeches, and life.¹ He would visit villages every day, and as soon as he entered a village, he and his followers would sweep the roads and clean the drains. He relied

on villagers for food and shelter. At night, there would be a programme (*kirtan*) where he talked about the divine, alongside sanitation to create awareness among villagers. Throughout his life, he organised communities with folk songs, spiritual speeches, skits, and dances, helping them to achieve cleanliness and self-reliance.

Drawing inspiration from him, the Government of Maharashtra launched the SGGSA. There were two reasons for this – the need for an integrated approach to sanitation, and the need for community participation in the campaign.² The state government decided to play the role of a facilitator and help communities to take their own initiatives to implement the programme (Thakre 2000).³ The campaign uses strategies such as working with individuals, youth groups, self-help groups (SHGs), and schoolchildren to involve the community. Other sub-programmes such as solid waste management and biogas plants are also a part of the SGGSA's integrated approach.

Problem Identification and Community Initiative

During a break from studies at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Tuljapur, I began discussing issues such as the ravages of malaria, water and sanitation problems, the lack of quality education, and the issue of accountability in local self-governance with friends in Sarola. Though people were aware of the problems, they did not know how to solve them.

In November 2006, I noticed an advertisement on the SFADWSA in *Dainik Samrat*, a Marathi daily, at the Swami Vivekanand Gramin Vachnalay (rural library). It was published by the state government with an appeal to people to participate in the programme. It also mentioned a prize of Rs 1.5 lakh. I discussed this appeal and its possible benefits (cleanliness, health benefits, prizes, and so on) with friends. The next challenge was to convince other dalit youth, whose daily routine was limited to home and work, of the value of the SFADWSA. We did this by arguing that the dalit part of the village (called Bhimnagar) was small, and it would be easy for us to clean it up, and win prizes. We discussed

this with 10 to 15 friends in the Panchshil Tarun Mandal, a youth group that actively participates in organising B R Ambedkar's birth anniversary celebrations in the village. We focused on two important benefits. First, Bhimnagar would become clean, and that was part of Babasaheb's message ("Leave the dirty life and adopt a new clean lifestyle"). Health-related problems and expenses on them could be avoided. Second, if we won the prize, it could be used for Bhimnagar's development. The next obstacle was to raise the funds required to buy plants, hire a tractor, and so on. I suggested that the problem would be solved if each of the 22 Bhimnagar households contributed.

To spread awareness, the youth group called a meeting of the dalit community and presented their idea. Senior members of the community raised many practical questions about the requirements for the prize, the need for money to participate, the participation of other village communities, and so on.

The youth group decided to form various committees (for awareness, finance, cultural activities, and the like) with members from all sections of society – men, women, youth and children. Members of the dalit community were used to contributing each year to the Ambedkar birth anniversary celebrations. That culture helped to partly solve the funding problem – the people readily agreed to contribute Rs 50 per household. Of 22 households, 18 paid up and the remaining said that they would contribute in kind. These small contributions were supplemented with the government's financial incentives for below the poverty line (BPL) households (Rs 1,200 per household) and contributions from gram panchayat members and others, and gram panchayat funds (Government of India 2013).

On the first day, an early morning rally was organised in the village with slogans and posters about the sanitation programme. The first assignment was to clean the roads. Everyone took a *jhadu* (broom) and began sweeping the roads. The enthusiasm of the youth was infectious and eventually their family members joined in. This also became an opportunity to create awareness. People asked

questions such as "Why are you doing this?" In response, the youth informed them that a sanitation programme was being implemented in Bhimnagar.

Though the inhabitants were cleaning their surroundings each day, it was difficult to make the village 100% clean. For one, the garbage collection point was in front of the *anganwadi*. Earlier attempts to move the pit, which belonged to an OBC family, had failed. The youth tried to convince them, without success. A legal notice by the dalit sarpanch also did not work. The zilla parishad school headmaster had been observing us, and had good community mobilisation skills. He took it upon himself to request the family to shift the garbage collection point and requested the gram panchayat to provide an alternative site.

The involvement of the headmaster proved very useful. He explained to us that cleaning Bhimnagar alone would not qualify us for the prize, and informed us about the other government guidelines – everyone should have toilets and use them, there should be trees in front of all the houses, and so on. Further, we realised that it was not enough for dalit households alone to be ODF; the entire village had to be so. Though some had strong doubts about other people participating, especially those from other castes, we held discussions with the sarpanch, village secretary, gram panchayat members, and the members of several panchayat committees.

Role of Local Self-governance

The sarpanch decided to call a gram sabha meeting. The panchayat secretary explained the programme and the responsibilities the people would have to undertake to make it successful. The youth who had taken the initiative explained its benefits. The headmaster did a brilliant job of building people's confidence about their being able to do it. To convince those who remained doubtful, the youth began working with different groups, talking to youngsters and women in all the communities. The headmaster and teachers began teaching students about the sanitation programme and also motivated them to convince their parents. Schoolchildren even organised

awareness rallies. After 10 days of collective work, there were positive results, and almost all the villagers were ready to participate in the programme and contribute to it.

Again, the first assignment was to clean the village. At the start, the response from the villagers was very poor, but when all the teachers, children, and the youth began wielding brooms, many of the others joined in. The next important task was to build toilets and stop open defecation.

An important aspect of the programme was the inclusion of every section of the village in it. Winning the full support and participation of the Wadar community was the first target. Towards this, the youth began working with the panchayat members and two former sarpanches, they organised awareness programmes and meetings, and initiated forming SHGs.

Even after constructing toilets, planting trees, and cleaning the village, it was not easy to convince some people to use their toilets. Though there were enough toilets, some were not comfortable with using them at home, and continued to defecate in the open. An old man, Rajendra Mali, said, "Jithe khaycha thithech hagnyacha! Aplychane tar honar nahi! Khana ani hagnya madhe difference asayla pahije na" (Where one eats, how can one defecate? I cannot do this! There should be a distance between the food and toilet). The cultural team performed skits to create awareness about the health issues related to open defecation. The people found them humorous; some were convinced, but not all. Two activists came up with a new strategy to solve this problem and launched a "good morning campaign" (GMC). From 5 am to 8 am, a group with musical instruments walked to places where people went for open defecation, ostensibly for practice sessions. This worked like magic – in five days, everyone had switched to the use of toilets.

Conclusions

After one year, in 2008-09, the village was awarded the central government's Nirmal Gram Puraskar by the president of India. In 2008, the village received a

district-level prize for implementing the SGGSA successfully. In the same year, the dalit community participated separately in the SFADWSA and received the block-level first prize of Rs 5 lakh, which was spent on the development of the dalit quarter. The village also got a regional award (in three financial years) for effective solid-waste and water management, and for being "eco-friendly". These awards are incidental to the other outcomes of the sanitation programme – increased awareness, a culture of collective action (including strengthening of panchayati raj institutions), women's empowerment through SHGs, greater accountability and transparency, and so on.

This case study shows that the goal of being ODF is not as simple as building toilets. Many factors are at work – Sarola's journey began with an advertisement in a Marathi regional newspaper. It required education as well as access to information (provided by a village reading room). It shows the importance of education not just in the narrow sense of literacy, but also other government interventions. Cash incentives such as awards are also not enough. Achieving ODF status required public action in an otherwise divided local community (in terms of caste, among other things). In Sarola, this was facilitated by local government institutions such as the gram sabha, which met regularly.

Maharashtra has in recent years made a real effort to encourage rural households to adopt cleaner and healthier sanitation practices. According to the Census of India (2011), the proportion of households practising open defecation in the state is 34%, which is an improvement on the all-India average of 50%. A Planning Commission study (Government of India 2013) credits the state's initiatives, including the SGGSA, for the rapid progress that has been achieved in promoting cleanliness and hygiene.

NOTES

- 1 See <http://indiasanitationportal.org/1807>
- 2 See <http://zpjalgao.gov.in>
- 3 See presentation by S Thakre, principal secretary, rural development, Government of Maharashtra at <http://wsscc-global-forum.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/1-Rewards-Sanctions-SGGSA.pdf>

REFERENCES

- Drèze, Jean and Amartya Sen (2013): *An Uncertain Glory: India and Its Contradictions* (New York: Penguin).
- Government of India (2013): "Evaluation of Total Sanitation Campaign", Programme Evaluation Organisation (New Delhi: Planning Commission).
- Prüss-Ustün, A, R Bos, F Gore and J Bartram (2008): *Safer Water, Better Health* (Geneva: World Health Organisation).
- Sarola ICDS Survey Report (2013): Gram Panchyat Sarola, Block Tujapur, Dist Osmanabad.
- Spears, D, A Ghosh and O Cumming (2013): "Open Defecation and Childhood Stunting in India: An Ecological Analysis of New Data from 112 Districts", available at www.plosone.org
- Thakre, S (2000): "Sant Gadgebaba Gram Swatchtha Abhiyan", presentation, Government of Maharashtra, available at <http://wsscc-global-forum.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/1-Rewards-Sanctions-SGGSA.pdf> (last accessed on 4 April 2014).

Economic & Political WEEKLY

EPW 5-Year CD-ROM 2004-08 on a Single Disk

The digital versions of *Economic and Political Weekly* for **2004, 2005, 2006, 2007** and **2008** are now available on a single disk. The **CD-ROM** contains the complete text of 261 issues published from 2004 to 2008 and comes equipped with a powerful search, tools to help organise research and utilities to make your browsing experience productive. The contents of the **CD-ROM** are organised as in the print edition, with articles laid out in individual sections in each issue.

With its easy-to-use features, the **CD-ROM** will be a convenient resource for social scientists, researchers and executives in government and non-government organisations, social and political activists, students, corporate and public sector executives and journalists.

Price for 5 year **CD-ROM** (in INDIA)

Individuals - Rs 1500

Institutions - Rs 2500

To order the **CD-ROM** send a bank draft payable at Mumbai in favour of *Economic and Political Weekly*.

Any queries please email: circulation@epw.in

Circulation Manager,

Economic and Political Weekly

320-321, A to Z Industrial Estate, Ganpatrao Kadam Marg, Lower Parel,
Mumbai 400 013, India