AN OPEN MIND
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The first step to end open defecation

For a large part of India, open defecation is not a problem. It is a habit, a behaviour, a way of life. It is a practice that children inherit from their elders. It is the only way people have ever known. And the only way to change something that has been accepted for generations, is to start with an open mind.

Many have. Across villages and towns. People, organisations, local leaders, policy-makers, government. And they have shown it works.

These stories are proof.
A NEW DAWN

Open defecation is especially harsh on women. Having to go out in the fields at odd hours is fraught with all kinds of danger. While that’s true for women everywhere, it is also true that they don’t always get the opportunity to do something about it.

The women of Ratapur did. Or rather, they created the opportunity. One day, 10 of them woke up at dawn as usual. But instead of going out to defecate in the open, they began digging pits around their homes. Work continued till late afternoon, by which time they managed to set up five temporary toilets using old saris and bedsheets as enclosures.

That was just the beginning.

The local authorities took up the issue, and formed the Shauch Mukt Sanst. This group worked with an NGO called Yuva Forum and started campaigning for toilets in every home. The village was declared open defecation free on August 15th. But the group still gets up at dawn, only this time to stop people from going out in the fields. Armed with flashlights and whistles, they walk around the fields, singing about sanitation to the tune of popular bhajans.

“People here used to say that working on issues like toilets and defecation wasn’t the right thing to do for girls. But now they all agree that it is the most important thing, especially for us.”

Chaman Sahu and Arti Dubey – Yuva Forum members
IT'S NEVER TOO LATE

Some say Kunwarbai Yadav is 102. Others say she is 104. In Kotrabhari, a hamlet deep inside the forested area of Dhaneti, no one can say with authority what her real age is. But one thing is certain, not one of the 18 houses in the village had a toilet till a few months ago.

In May 2015, Bhim Singh, the Collector, visited Kotrabhari and spoke about the need for toilets at home. He also explained the steps the government was taking to help people build one.

The common dangers of going out in the fields included diseases, snake bites, and the occasional accidents during the monsoons. Nobody in the village contested these reasons, but they pitched against all these deep-rooted habits.

At least one that was more than a century old.

When Kunwarbai took the lead to get a toilet constructed in her house, the rest of the village found the biggest reason to build one themselves.

If someone that old could embrace change, then anyone could.

Kotrabhari was declared open defecation free on July 15.
For Kunwarbai, after a 100-year wait.

KUNWARBAI DIDN'T JUST MOTIVATE HER VILLAGE, BUT ALSO THE NEIGHBOURING VILLAGE OF BERARI, WHERE ALL 450 FAMILIES ARE WORKING TO END OPEN DEFECTION.
LEAVE IT TO THE CHILDREN

On Independence Day this year, Pipaliya Mira was declared open defecation free. But as they say, old habits die hard. Some people continued to step out every morning. It was time to get them to start using the toilets they had built.

Santoosh Tiwari works for Samarthan Sanstha, an NGO that works on sanitation. She teamed up with Sunita, the Cluster Coordinator, and Braj Mohan Malviya, the Block Coordinator. They met Preeti Bharti, the Sarpanch, and launched the Dabba Dhol Gang. A bunch of kids who would go around toppling over the containers in which people carry water when they step out to defecate.

The gang is headed by 12-year old Dharmesan, who leads his motley crew from 5am onwards. With whistles around their necks, they do a thorough search for offenders in the bushes.

The villagers are fast learning to use their toilets. And the gang has begun teaching children from neighbouring villages the fine art of fanning across the fields and blowing the whistle on open defecation.

“"I DON’T HAVE TO WAKE UP THE KIDS FOR THEIR SAM VIGIL. THEY WAKE ME UP INSTEAD.”

Preet Bharti – Sarpanch
Every year on Rakshabandhan, brothers promise to protect their sisters. This year, the local authorities in Chhattisgarh came up with an idea that would give brothers a chance to be as good as their word.

‘Mor Bhai No 1’ is a contest that asks men to gift toilets to their sisters. Because a toilet will do everything they have been promising their sisters – protect them from disease and ensure their safety. The winner of the competition will be given a cash prize of Rs 12,000. And with 2500 registrations in Bilaspur district alone, the idea has taken root.

It certainly did for Shrim Nirmal, a farmer from the village of Marjor Pehri. His sister Arti is differently-abled since birth. Going to the fields three or four times a day was an ordeal for her, as well as her family members. She would go on her tricycle when she could, but on days when it rained, or late in the night, she had to be carried by two people. When Shrim gifted her a toilet, he also built a ramp that would give her easy access. It cost him more than the prize money he would get even if he wins the contest.

But then, you can’t put a price tag on a promise.

A BROTHER’S PROMISE
KUTCHA HOUSE NEW PUCCA TOILET

Within the Gram Panchayat of Sardhana, there is a small village called Nadi. Its 350 families are mostly farmers who work and live on their small patches of land. Some of their houses are made of clay and mud, with thatched roofs. Would the families living in these kutcha houses see any merit in building toilets before building solid walls around their huts? Sarpanch Madhu Paroda would often wonder as she went from house to house with Harishan Jat, the Ward Pancn, speaking about open defecation and its harms.

Babu Lai is one such farmer. The young man has a wife and a newborn child. He shares his fields with his brothers - Ramesh Lai and Mangay Lal. The three also share a compound. When Babu Lai was told about the need to build a toilet, he decided to go for it. And so did the rest of the villagers. Whatever the state of their houses, at least they had a roof over their heads. What they did not have were toilets. So that’s what they decided to build first.

Sardhana was declared open defecation free on August 13, 2015. Babu Lai and the people of Nadi have shown the world, that they have got their priorities right.

“TO ENSURE THAT THE VILLAGERS DIDN’T HAVE TO WAIT FOR MONEY FROM THE GOVERNMENT TO START BUILDING TOILETS, WE PROVIDED THEM WITH RAW MATERIAL. THEY PAID FOR IT WHEN THEY RECEIVED THE MONEY.”

Madhu Paroda - Sarpanch, Gram Panchayat, Sardhana
MAKE IT YOUR WAY

Kanhai is a village set deep inside a forest. The backyard of almost every home merges into vast, open spaces. It is easy to see why stepping out to defecate was the obvious thing to do for these villagers.

The local administration had long been communicating with the villagers and their leaders about the importance and urgency of building toilets. But they realised that a fresh approach was necessary to make locals change their habit. It was felt that families who built their own toilets were more likely to sit in them. While the toilet seat, pit and platform were made by engineers and masons hired by the administration, the families constructed the enclosures their own way.

Each family used readily available, indigenous material like mud-packed bamboo and clay, and built their toilets like their homes. Some painted them in rich colours, others hung saris as curtains. Some even named them after their children.

Kanhai is now open defecation free. Its 101 houses have 101 toilets. And a 101 unique facades.
HOW FAR WILL YOU GO?

Mithilesh has traversed three kilometres with his message of building toilets and stopping open defecation. For many, that’s hardly a distance worth mentioning. But for this 23-year-old who cannot move without help or support, it is the farthest he has ever travelled.

Brahmanbheri is a village of around 200 houses. Before April 2015, only 45 had toilets. When the district administration asked the village panchayat to campaign against open defecation, Motiram Khobragade, the Gram Panchayat Secretary, knew they needed to do something memorable. He assembled a procession, and at the head of it was Mithilesh in his specially designed tricycle with its messages, a toilet-model fashioned out of thermocol, a music system and speakers. The songs were written by Khobragade himself, composed, sung and recorded by the villagers.

Almost everyone contributed to spreading the message. That’s what made implementation a lot easier.

It took only 45 days for the village to be declared open defecation free.

And Mithilesh is now planning to take his message to other villages.
CELEBRATIONS CAN WAIT

In 2015, the world celebrated Eid on July 18. But for Kesia, a small village in Rajnandgaon district, it came two days later.

Rashida Rawani, the Panchayat Secretary, was among the core group that volunteered to spread the message of building toilets at home, gathering masons to do the job, and motivating people to use them. They knew it wasn’t going to be easy. When they started, just 12 houses out of 220 had toilets. Within a few days they realised that their campaign needed a deadline. Something that would make the community act now.

That’s when Rashida took a vow to celebrate Eid only when her village was declared open defecation free. And everyone else took a vow to shorten her wait.

Eventually, it took her two more days of fasting. On July 20, 2015, Kesia was declared open defecation free.

And the village had not one, but two reasons to celebrate.
COMMON GROUND

A broken down structure had long stood between Moharram Ali and his three nephews - Shabbir Hussain, Chand Ali and Ali Hider. The two families lived next to each other, and everything else had been divided fairly between them. Expect this one little structure, that was occupying the land both parties claimed as their own. The disagreement wasn’t just contained within this small area between the two houses; it also crept into their relationship.

Their village, Daurai, is home to 2164 families, over 80% of which have already built toilets. The Sarpanch, Alam Ali, and the Ward Panch, Asif Ali, have been doing everything possible to bring the last few families around.

Between the families of Moharram Ali and his nephews, there were 21 people living in the compound. Without a single toilet. The panchayat had a solution. Ask both families to build toilets on the disputed land. But would they agree? They made the suggestion, and to their surprise, both parties got up as one and started construction.

Where the ramshackle structure had once stood, today there are four toilets in a row. All built over a common pit, with a common tank.

“WE WERE ONLY TRYING TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM OF OPEN DEFECATION IN OUR VILLAGE. WE ALSO ENDED UP BRINGING THESE TWO FAMILIES BACK TOGETHER.”

Alam Ali, Sarpanch - Daurai
A DIFFERENT SONG

People think that Kinnars – or eunuchs – only sing, dance and take money and clothes from families that have any reason to celebrate.
Sanjana, a Kinnar, has lived with this perception, knowing that the world never expects them to contribute to society.
And this had always troubled her.

When Pawan Swaranikar and Monica George, the district and block leaders of Nandini in Madhya Pradesh, started reaching out to the 131 families to tell them about the harms of open defecation and to ask them to build toilets, they realised they needed an approach that would grab people’s attention. Balaram, the director of an NGO called Mitra Srisar Samiti that works with transgenders, figured what was needed. Sanjana and her friends knew how to gather people around them.
And they knew how to make every message entertaining.

With the help of the state technical support team, the NGO trained Sanjana and her friends to write campaign songs. In December 2014 their act debuted.

Nandini was declared open defecation free on September 1, 2015.
The group, however, hasn’t stopped singing and dancing.
There are more villages that need to be told about building toilets.
A DAY IS ALL IT TAKES

When residents of Dhamansara heard that a neighbouring village had been declared open defecation free, they decided to follow suit. The panchayat took stock of the situation, and realised that out of a total of 315 homes, 123 were still without toilets. The local leaders decided not just to start working on it, but to do so in a way that would set an example for everyone.

A women’s self-help group called Mahila Swayam Sahayata Samooh was formed. Its members went from house to house, spoke against open defecation and persuaded families to build and use toilets. They chose 50 houses that were ready with raw material to start building.

Meanwhile, the Block Development Officer arranged for a group of engineers to conduct a four-day training in masonry for 30-40 women.

The day the training got over, the women took up their tools, and spread themselves across the 50 homes, working without pause for 12 hours. By the time they put their tools down, the village had 50 new toilets. All in a day’s work!
A DAUGHTER TO HER PARENTS

Once a girl is married and goes to her in-laws, she is not expected to have any more duties towards her parents. Of the house she grew up in. It was no different for Sushila Bai.

Till some time ago, her parental home in Surgi, a small village in Rajandgaon, lacked a toilet. But when the movement to build toilets was initiated by the village panchayat, her parents Bijanar Das Salve and Sukurao Bai, missed having their son with them more than ever before. The boy was now married and settled in a city many miles away, and rarely came home.

When Sushila Bai came to know that her parents’ house was among the last few that still didn’t have a toilet, she knew she would have to act. Many years ago she had worked as an assistant to her uncle who was a mason. And at her husband’s village she had continued to help with minor repairs at home. So she went to her parents’ house with her husband and her tools, and built the toilet.

She is back in her own home now. But if her parents ever need someone by their side, they know who they can count on.

“"I was only doing what was important for my parents. Now they tell me I did something even bigger. But what can be bigger than that?"" Sushila Bai"
Traditionally, the Kalbelias are a nomadic tribe. They would move from one village to another, helping their hosts get rid of snakes that turned up in their houses and fields. Performing the famous Kalbelia dance was the other thing they did. It is only in the last 25 years or so, that they have started settling down.

Would people who are still getting used to living in houses, even consider building toilets?

Ganahera village is home to around 1000 families. Just 68 of these belong to the Kalbelias. The number, however, mattered a lot as just one out of the 68 had a toilet. Dr Arushi Malik, the Collector of Ajmer district, was keen that the village be declared open defecation free.

When she and Balsingh Rawat, the Panchayat Extension Officer, met the village sarpanch and other local leaders for a motivational meeting, Madan Nath represented the Kalbelias. The man was famous for playing the flute, and for his moustache.

When the collector asked the leaders to pledge their support to the cause, Madan Nath stood up and declared that every single Kalbelia home would have a toilet within two months. Or else, he would shave off his prized moustache.

On September 21, 2015, Ganahera was declared open defecation free. Madan Nath still has his moustache. And another reason to twirl it.

“WE NEVER GO BACK ON OUR WORD. BE SIDES OUR DANCE, THAT’S THE OTHER THING WE ARE KNOWN FOR.”

Madan Nath
The Dabbu Dhol Gang.
A bunch of kids that go around topping over the containers in which people carry water when they step out to defecate in the open.
Village Pipalja Mira

Some say she is 102. Others say she is 104. But in her village Kurwa Bel was the first to build a toilet and break a hundred-year-old habit.
Village Koteshwar

The local authorities in Chhattisgarh ran a contest asking brothers to gift toilets to their sisters on Rashabanchan. Over 2500 people registered, and close to 1500 toilets were built. And gifted.
Village Manpoo Hennii
A group of women who call themselves Mahila Swayam Sahayata Samooh, worked without pause for 12 hours, and built 50 toilets in one day. 
Village Dhamasara

Madan Nath, a member of the Kalbelia tribe, declared that he would shave off his moustache if even a single Kalbelia home didn’t have a toilet within two months. He still has his moustache. 
Village Ganahera

Mithilesh, a 23-year old man who cannot move without help or support, went from house to house with his tricycle and with the message to build and use toilets. 
Village Brahambheri