

# T H E   O T H E R   H A L F

By Kalpana Sharma



**Changed lives:** *Rekha in front of the toilet in her compound.* PHOTO: KALPANA SHARMA



# The toilet revolution

Villages in Kurukshetra district, Haryana, are showing that providing clean sanitation to everyone is not an impossible task.

**R**ekha is a landless labourer in the village of Bishangarh in Haryana's Kurukshetra district. All around her poorly constructed open brick house, where the rain pours in through the rafters, are lush fields of potato and wheat. She lives there with her husband, an agricultural worker like her and her three children, a girl and two boys. Between the two of them, on the days they get work, they bring in around Rs. 150 a day. Her husband gets paid twice as much as her.

Rekha's pride is her outdoor toilet, built on the corner of her small plot. She has no money to build a door. A jute curtain does the job. But she has a constant source of water. So the toilet remains clean and there is no smell. The design is a simple one, easy to maintain, with a soak pit that we are told will not pollute the water table.

## Talking point

The toilet revolution in Bishangarh and other villages in Kurukshetra district has become a talking point. It draws visitors from around India and the world who look on in wonder as well-built Haryanvi women lustily shout "Jai Swatch-atha" (Long live cleanliness) and show off the toilets attached to their homes. Each costs around Rs. 1,200. The poor, like Rekha, get a subsidy. The others pay what they can and the rest comes from an NGO run by the local MP, young Navin Jindal, whose beaming countenance greets you at every street corner as you drive through the district.

Bishangarh has received the Nirmal Gram Puraskar, the prize instituted by the central government in recognition of villages that are free of open defecation. It is one of hundreds of villages across the country that are qualifying for this award. The women in the village, who are part of the Nigrani (vigilance) Samitis, go around with torches, sticks and whistles early in the morning. If they catch anyone defecating in the open, they blow the whistle and shine the torch on the crouching figure. This, they believe, embarrasses the individual to the point that they will not do it again.

There is no question that the toilet revolution has made a huge difference to

the lives of women, as well as elderly men and children. No more do they have to scramble in the dark in the nearby fields. Women, especially, would have to go before dawn or wait until after dusk. The absence of toilets assaults their dignity, lays them open to sexual harassment and has a direct impact on their health. Not anymore.

## Is it sustainable?

But questions remain. Can this be sustained without policing? Will people change their habits so easily, particularly men who feel no embarrassment defecating in the open? Can it work without a subsidy? Is it possible in villages where there is no water? Where there is no electricity? In Kurukshetra district, out of 418 villages, 412 are electrified. And will it work in villages with caste and communal divides, where the villagers are not willing to cooperate? In Bishangarh, the majority belongs not just to one caste, but even one *gotra* (clan). The woman Sarpach is also from the same caste and *gotra*. Hence, getting everyone to work together is a little easier. Women I spoke to acknowledged that the situation would have been different if they had been a "mixed" village, in terms of caste.

One also hopes this will be the first step in enhancing women's status. For, women are visible in their support of the toilet revolution. Yet in Haryana, and Kurukshetra district, the sex ratio remains skewed in favour of boys. And dowry has not disappeared although some women insist it

is declining. If one goes by what Rekha's 18-year-old, college-going daughter Babita has to say, it has increased. "People pay upto Rs. 10 lakhs", she says ruefully. And marriage, of course, is inevitable, she adds. What other option is there?

Babita is lucky that she has got as far as she has in her education. In government schools around this country, adolescent girls are dropping out, or missing school, because there are no toilets. So when they get their monthly period, they simply don't go to school. In Kurukshetra district, all the schools have toilets, claims the indefatigable Sumedha Kataria, the Additional District Collector who is also the force behind the sanitation movement in the district.

## Bigger challenge

Of course, urban sanitation is an even bigger challenge and intimately linked to the almost insurmountable problem of providing housing for millions of urban poor. You can build community toilets but until you solve the housing crisis in cities, you really will not be able to deal effectively with sanitation. For women especially, the absence of toilets is a far more traumatic experience in cities than in villages as there are practically no secluded places.

Some of the more innovative projects on show at the recent Sacosan III (South Asian Conference on Sanitation) in New Delhi — which incidentally was virtually ignored by the "national" media in the capital — were those where village self-help groups are using simple technology to manufacture sanitary napkins at low cost. This is being done in several States and in at least one location in Tamil Nadu, the increase in school attendance of adolescent girls has been dramatic.

Toilets, sanitation, sanitary napkins, defecation — these are not things we like to talk about. Yet, this is such a fundamental issue that affects all our lives — especially if we happen to be poor and women. Half of India defecates in the open. The government hopes to get all these 600 million people to start using toilets by 2012. That's a lot of toilets to build in just four years.

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