

Special Report 1

Small hands shaping the future

Village Kids Spark a Sanitation Revolution

In India, there are about 250 million people* who do not use toilets and defecate in the open in rural areas. Lack of sanitation causes serious problems to their living environment. Some children hesitate to or cannot attend school because of hygiene issues. In a small village in India, primary school students wishing to 'have their own toilet at home' started a movement to improve the situation. They tried to persuade their parents and the local community to improve public health with sanitation and the environment.

Toyota ABCD Program

*The Economic Survey Report 2018 (Ministry of Finance, India)



Children tried to persuade their parents to "build a toilet at home" in a village in southern India. Some of them started hunger strikes including Deekshitha (right) who appears here with her younger sister Varshitha (left). Other children followed, and it became a movement.

Deekshitha and her younger sister Varshitha live in a house with a cowshed. Milk is collected every morning and it provides important cash income for the family. The daughters help their parents who farm in a nearby field.



Mohith and his younger sister Priyanka. He persuaded his parents to build a toilet at home because “I wanted to help my sister and mother. My wish is to get a job protecting peoples’ lives in future”.



Mohith's mother taking cows to the field.

Deekshitha didn't give up. She remembered that her grandmother sometimes didn't eat anything for a whole day when she took cows to the field. She imagined that the hunger must be terrible and came up with the idea of protesting to her parents with a hunger strike. But the hunger turned out to be so painful. In imagination, she saw a bowl of rice inviting her to eat it, but she refused to do so because she thought it would break her resolution. Her mother was shocked to see Deekshitha lying in bed starving and felt so sad that she cried with her. According to the school Principal, the cost of building a toilet was expected to be around 10,000 Rupees. But the recent droughts reduced farmers' income and some families had to live

with about 20,000 Rupees annually. Like the other villagers, Deekshitha's parents had no spare money to build a toilet because there were many other urgent things to be done.

Protecting my Mother and Sister

Deekshitha's friends at school started to follow her example and the protest spread among the village children. One of them was 11-year old Mohith. He watches out when his mother and the younger sister defecate near the field. He says “I don't want anyone seeing my mother. I am protecting my mother and my sister”. He knew that some men in the village talked about women defecating in the open. He told his father “Men might find it relatively easy to

“Why did children protest with a hunger strike in a tiny village in India?”



Boys stand near a field on the outskirts of the village where they say that defecation in the open was not particularly uncommon among some of the villagers in the past.

It costs half a year's income to build a toilet at home.

“I won't eat anything unless we have a toilet at home! Please, please build it for all the family”. That's what a 10-year old Indian girl Deekshitha told her mother when she started her protest with a hunger strike. There is no toilet at home. She goes out early every morning with her younger sister to defecate in the open field, just a few minutes' walk from home. Her life changed when she moved from her grandmother's house to join her parents three years ago. She discovered that there was no toilet at home. In the south Indian village of Naga-

vara where she lives, there were many homes without a toilet because many farmers earn just sufficient to live on without much luxury and can't afford toilets. She found that out from her mother who asked, “Can you go out in the morning and do it in the open?” It was a sad surprise for her because her grandmother had a toilet. There are snakes in the field. People walk in the narrow path very near to the place where she defecates. She tries hard to never let the others see her and her younger sister. They keep extremely quiet and take turns to watch out for any danger. School lavatories also have problems. Students wait in long lines because there aren't sufficient facilities.

When she can't have her private moments in a clean toilet or relieve herself comfortably, “my stomach begins to ache, and I suffer from diarrhea. When it's bad, I don't even want to read books”, said Deekshitha. She likes studying but, on few occasions, when she felt at her worst, she was late or absent from school. “I can't bear it. I really want a toilet at home!” was her desperate feeling when she asked her mother. Mother replied “You know how things are... It's not that simple”. Deekshitha was disappointed but she noticed that mother looked very sad when she had to refuse her request. She knew her mother feared the dangers of open defecation and really wanted a toilet, just like herself.



Sinchana (left) helps her grandmother at home with cooking and household chores including looking after her younger sister(center).

SNEHA staff member, Sowbhagya, talking to a student at school. She seems to be a popular figure as many children come and talk to her asking questions and seeking guidance.



School children washing their hands in a basin at the playground.

defecate in the open, but women are different. My mother and sister can't keep on doing it. I want to make them feel safe with a toilet at home". But the economic situation was not so simple. His parents grew coconuts, but the recent three-year drought

reduced the harvest drastically. Like other farmers, they were in debt and the toilet construction had to wait. Sanitation is a serious issue for adolescent girls. Sinchana who is the president of the school's student council is 12 years old. When she

moved into the village, she was surprised to find out that there was no toilet at home. She said "I never go alone when I go out in the open. I don't want to be seen by men or boys. When my class was asked who hasn't got a toilet at home, I felt ashamed to raise my hand".

As her mother works in Bangalore, Sinchana is taken care of by her grandmother. She asked her for a toilet at home. Her grandmother said, "She cried when she asked for a toilet. But there is no money to build it". Her grandmother considered parting with her favorite earrings for the money.

Change began with cleaning toilets

The children's dream of having a toilet at home didn't materialize soon for several reasons including the lack of money. But the hunger strike and the children's attempt to convince the parents pushed the dream

closer to coming true. It was Toyota Kirloskar Motor (TKM)'s ABCD (A Behavioural Change Demonstration) program that motivated the children to appeal to their parents.

TKM chose SNEHA, a non-governmental organization, as a partner to carry out their activities rooted in the local community. The staff of SNEHA visit schools in the district regularly to reach out to the students, teachers and the villagers. This includes teaching about the unhygienic impact of open defecation, the necessity of washing hands, and precautionary measures against infections and disease. They also provide public information about the government subsidy for constructing toilets. The aim is to encourage the students to think more about hygiene and discuss it with their parents at home.

People sometimes wonder why there are not enough toilets. Although one factor is the lack of income that prevents families building toilets, locals

point out that "There are more than a few people who don't want to clean their toilets because they think they might get dirty". Behind this thinking lies the ancient custom that used to relate social class to occupation, and a perception that cleaning toilets can be a job for someone low down in society because it's often regarded as "unclean".

The Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Government has launched a national campaign to increase the supply of toilets. TKM coordinated with the Government's effort and started the ABCD program while constructing toilets in government schools (public primary schools) for girl child. TKM knew that sanitation is a hard and challenging issue. Some of the newly constructed lavatories become filthy and unsuitable for use. Many people preferred to defecate in the open partly because they don't want to use uncleaned lavatories.

"You can't solve the problem by

simply offering new facilities and constructing toilets". That's what Naveen Soni, Vice President of TKM, thought when he was planning the program. "Unless you change peoples' behavior, toilets won't be used properly". He realized it was important to maintain their cleanliness if you are aiming for sustainable and permanently useful toilets. Naveen and his colleagues were convinced that one of the socially



Connecting with the villagers is part of the routine for SNEHA staff. Sowbhagya talks to the villagers about the importance of home toilets in promoting health and hygiene.



Deekshitha cleaning a school toilet.

At an expanded village council meeting, students made requests and suggestions for better sanitation and hygiene to the local administrators.



The CEO of a local government, R. Latha, said “TKM’s project bridged a gap between the local administration and society.”



Students of the village school said, “We tried, and we did it”.



Smiling Deekshitha and her family stand before the toilet (right) that finally arrived after her appeals.

responsible roles of TKM is promoting behavioural change in children who are the stakeholders of the future. They strategized and coined the program, “A Behavioural Change Demonstration” and it included demonstrations of cleaning school toilets. The students watched and increasingly participated in the demonstrations.

The school Principal at Nagavara sent a strong message to the parents by describing the merits of good cleaning and sanitation practices. He said “Toilet cleaning is an opportunity to think more closely of other people such as the cleaners or those mistakenly looked down on as lower class. Children may understand how the others feel if they make the effort by themselves”. Hopefully, they will continue using the toilet cleanly and wisely”.

Children and women transforming society

You can hear the voice of Sowbhag-

ya from one of the newly built toilets at Nagavara school. She is a SNEHA staff member who visits the school and teaches the students how to clean the toilet. She tells them “Look at this corner, it’s still dirty. Think how a person would feel if the toilet was filthy. Let’s clean it nicely”. Students follow her example and start brushing the pan. She visits the school dressed smartly and riding a moped. As she pleasantly engages with the local community, many children seem to admire her.

According to SNEHA management, “In the past, it was difficult to imagine someone who finished a Master’s course at university cleaning toilets with a brush in hand.” Sowbhagya says “Fundamentally, toilet cleaning should be done by the person who uses it. I think cleaning the toilet and changing one’s behavior will eventually eliminate social classes and become a catalyst for creating a nation where everyone is equal”. Just like the children, women

have been challenged by the lack of toilets and hoping for change. It’s women as much as the children who are starting to bring waves of change.

The village council held an expanded meeting with school children in November 2017. Students from different schools made requests to improve the sanitation, for example because “The school lavatory is still broken down and it needs to be repaired as soon as possible. There is only one in use”. People in India say there is a tradition of listening to children. As the students’ perceptions of sanitation improved, “Children started to ask for better sanitation, and in some cases suggest adults to improve public health”, said one of the teachers.

The local government paid attention and supported TKM’s program. The CEO of Ramanagara district, R. Latha, a top government official of the district, has been seriously concerned about the shortages of toilets.



Deekshitha and her mother, “I knew the hunger strike was a bad thing, but I wanted to show how serious I was”, said Deekshitha.

She says “NGOs and private sector often have unique capabilities to reach out to the area with speed where government wishes to engage more. I am glad that the longstanding sanitation issue has rapidly improved with government leading the campaign with the private sector”.

“Small hands” shaping the future

The families of Deekshitha, Mohith and Sinchana managed to build their own toilets. Their parents or guard-

ians borrowed money temporarily. The cost was covered by the government subsidy. The children say that their toilets are cleaned by themselves with care. Students of the school started to parade through the village to raise awareness for better hygiene.

A public health officer said, “There are now very few villagers who defecate in the open”. The long toilet line at school became short. It brought a bonus of approximately extra 20 hours of classes annually because

they can start on schedule. The academic performance of the school improved with notable progress by girls.

Deekshitha has a dream of becoming a doctor. She says “I don’t want anyone going through the same pain as I did. I want to help lots of people in leading a healthier and happy life”.

It turns out that children’s small hands and voices have amazing potential to change adult society and to shape their own future.



Toyota ABCD* program

Toyota Kirloskar Motor (TKM) provides clean sanitation facilities to schools in India. It has involved constructing sanitation units at approximately 200 government schools since 2014. Their socially responsible and sustainable approach encourages behavioural changes of the school children and the local community. The aim is to go further than just constructing facilities, and the project is called ABCD (A Behavioural Change Demonstration). TKM partnered with SNEHA, a non-governmental organization. They implemented the program using various demonstrating tools reaching out to 30,000 children in 180 villages in Ramanagara district where TKM is situated. Due to the overwhelming success of ABCD program more schools from neighboring districts are demanding to introduce the program in their schools.

*ABCD : A Behavioural Change Demonstration