

## **D9 | TOTAL SANITATION PROGRAMS AT THE COST OF HUMAN DIGNITY**

In Global Health Watch 4 we critically interrogated the currently dominant approach to sanitation termed ‘Community Led Total Sanitation’ (CLTS). CLTS is now being adopted in the rural areas of many Asian and African countries and is being promoted by the World Bank’s Water and Sanitation Programme, the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council, UNICEF, WaterAid, PLAN International and other international NGOs. By 2012 at least 20 countries had designated CLTS as their national sanitation approach in rural areas. The starting point for CLTS is the contention that communities should control their own development and that ‘outsiders’ should play the role of ‘triggering’ community responses. The ‘community’ ensures that households build their own toilets using their own resources. CLTS facilitators ‘trigger’ communities to recognize the link between open defecation and disease. The community then formulates its own plan for each household to build a latrine, so eradication of open defecation is ‘total’. A distinctive feature of CLTS is that it forces participants to confront their ‘shit’ by using this word, and by identifying and visiting places where people openly defecate.

We pressed for a critical examination of CLTS within a broader socio-political and economic context. CLTS arguably exemplifies several features of a neoliberal approach to development – one which individualizes problems and their solutions and frees governments from promoting the welfare of their citizens. CLTS, we argued, needs also to be seen in terms of individual human rights versus the health of the ‘community’, as well as the balance between a person’s right to dignity and their right of access to sanitation as well as the right of the ‘community’ to a faecal-free environment. The chapter concluded that: “There is a need for systematic monitoring and analysis to move past anecdotes about the sustainability and impact of CLTS. What is missing is a basis on which to assess local change in the context of broader impacts of the approach, which may be negative (People’s Health Movement et al 2014)”.

To explore further the issue of coercion that is innate to the CLTS approach, presented below are case studies from the Chhattisgarh state of India – one of the poorest Indian states.

### **Toilet Tyranny: case studies from Chhattisgarh in India**

Kuwar Bai, now a well-known name in the Indian media and government, is a 104-year-old lady from Dhamtari district of Chhattisgarh who sold her

ten goats to build two toilets in her house. According to news reports, she wanted to highlight the importance of sanitation and toilets and got these toilets built for the use of the women family members and neighbours. The media extolled her efforts, the government celebrated her more than once, with the Prime Minister touching her feet as a sign of respect (Drolia, 2016a). However, no one questioned why this lady had to sell her precious livestock to build toilets, when the government was in fact supposed to give her funds for constructing them<sup>1</sup>.

Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA) or Clean India Campaign is one of the flagship programmes of the current Indian Government. Previous governments had implemented similar programmes, like the Total Sanitation Campaign and the Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government launched the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA) immediately after coming to power in 2014 with the aim to “accelerate the efforts to achieve universal sanitation coverage and to put focus on sanitation”<sup>2</sup>. All these programmes, past and present, follow the CLTS model, albeit with some modifications (for example unlike in the ‘pure’ CLTS model, the government subsidizes money spent by the poor on latrine construction).

Subsequently, states like Chhattisgarh have gone all out to make this programme a ‘success’. The aim of SBA in the state is to make all villages ‘open defecation free’ (ODF). Chhattisgarh, with 5.6 million households, aims to construct 2.6 million toilets by 2019 (Business Standard, 2015).

Access to proper sanitation and clean drinking water is a serious problem in India and in Chhattisgarh, especially for the poor. However, the manner in which this stand-alone ‘toilet construction’ programme is being implemented has been problematic. This programme also does not take into consideration, the dimensions of water availability, community choice, affordability, caste, gender and other issues.

The coercive and mandatory nature of this programme has led to a number of infringements of people’s legal entitlements, privacy, financial security and human rights (see the statement by People’s Health Movement-India on the public lynching of a social activist protesting the shaming of women while defecating, by municipal workers in the state of Rajasthan, Box D9.1). This impact is being felt more by the poorer and vulnerable sections of society. The following cases in Chhattisgarh illustrate this.

*Withholding legal entitlement of subsidised grain unless toilets are built* Chhattisgarh has been highly praised for its government’s Public Distribution System (PDS) which is a programme that entitles families to receive subsidised grain (ration) every month. It was one of the first states to enshrine this provision in law through the state legislation on Food Security and Nutrition. However, there have been numerous instances in which the subsidized PDS grain has been withheld because families have not constructed toilets. Such instances

**Box D9.1: Lynching in the name of Total Sanitation Campaign<sup>3</sup>**

The Jan Swasthya Abhiyan (JSA) expresses deep shock at the murder of Zafar Hussain, a 55 year old social worker of Pratapgarh in Rajasthan. Zafar Hussain was publicly lynched in a frenzy by Municipal employees linked to the government's 'Swachh Bharat Abhiyan' (SBA), led, according to Press reports, by Nagar Parishad Commissioner Ashok Jain. Zafar Hussain's only crime was that he objected to the photographing of women defecating in the open. Those being photographed included the victim's wife and 14 year old daughter. Reports suggest that a massive cover up of the incident is being attempted and the perpetrators are yet to be apprehended.

Zafar had in the past submitted a memorandum against the harassment of women by civic officials, which included bullying and shaming of women blamed of defecating in the open, taking their photographs, running after women, seizing their water mugs and abusing them while they defecated.

*Vigilantism is rampant in the SBA*

The above is not an isolated incident but a consequence of the SBA's 'name and shame strategy' where personnel linked to the program organize vigilante squads that hound individuals they find violating the program's objectives. Instances of such vigilante actions are being reported from many parts of the country. As the bulk of people who do not have domestic latrines or access to community latrines are the poor, this strategy has become an excuse for victimizing the poor for their appalling living conditions.

In Pratapgarh, reports clearly indicate that the people being victimized were obliged to defecate in open fields because latrines had not been provided. In fact only days before the murder the victim himself had petitioned authorities demanding latrines and other sanitary facilities in the colony. A recent report indicates that data on open defecation free (ODF) villages is being fudged extensively and at least 25% of villages declared ODF in the country do not have functioning toilet facilities accessible to all households.

*Blaming the poor for their conditions of living*

As a health coalition JSA believes that access to latrines and good sanitation is a basic human right and the poor stand to benefit the most from such access. However, the manner in which the poor are being victimized in the course of the campaign smacks of extreme insensitivity to the conditions in which they live and an attitude of contempt towards their

situation. People do not choose to survive amid squalor and dirt, but are forced to do so because the country's developmental processes have continued to ignore their needs. The stark reality of 21<sup>st</sup> century India is that in many states vigilantism linked to the campaign prevents the poor accessing the public distribution system and other government benefits.

*Put an Immediate Stop to this heinous practice of 'name and shame'*

The Jan Swasthya Abhiyan demands that a high level inquiry be instituted into the lynching in Pratapgarh so that the perpetrators are arrested and justice is served.

The JSA demands that the strategy of 'name and shame' linked to the SBA be stopped forthwith and all vigilante squads be disbanded. Victimization of those unable to construct or access latrines should be stopped immediately.

The JSA is very concerned at the assault on privacy of individuals (especially of women) through photographing or videography that has been legitimised by the government as part of Swachh Bharat Abhiyan strategies. We demand that all states must put an immediate stop to all such practices. Such acts should be viewed as gender based violence and viewed as a crime related to sexual harassment of women.

The JSA supports any sensitive and participatory process that aims to ensure universal access to sanitation facilities. The design of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan's that relies on vigilantism and coercion and promotes 'victim blaming' can neither ensure equitable access to sanitation nor promote human rights.



**Image D9.1** Building a toilet in India in a rural setting (Sulakshana Nandi)

have become so widespread that the Chief Secretary of the state had to issue an order to all districts that rations entitled under law should not be withheld for people not constructing toilets. Despite this order, due to the immense pressure on the district administration and structures at a lower level to declare villages as ODF, officials in many districts have resorted to denying rations to pressurise people to build toilets (Krishna Das, 2015). For instance in village Karji, the block officer threatened the villagers that their monthly PDS ration will be withheld unless they construct toilets. The villagers complained and the media took up the case, after which they received their entitled grain.

The entitlement to grain is critical for the poorer and more vulnerable groups like the particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTGs) who are the most impoverished of tribal groups, having extremely high malnutrition levels. However, there have been cases in which whole villages of PVTGs have been denied grain as they have not managed to build toilets. Rice was given only after complaints were made to the food department. In another instance, families from the Baiga PVTG community were unable to build toilets as a few years previously they had invested in constructing toilets and the promised money from the government never came. They hence lacked money to re-build the toilets and neither could they take loan. Their PDS ration was withheld and it was only allocated after they organised a sit-in at the PDS shop.

*Secret ballot to identify people who are not using toilets* The Jashpur district administration ordered a secret ballot, using school children, to find out who in their village was not using toilets (Times of India, 2017b). Nearly 49,000 students from 1987 primary and secondary schools submitted names of people in their village, obtained through a secret ballot, who still practise open defecation. This is to be repeated periodically. This authoritarian practice has features of fascism, and using children in this manner is unethical.

*CCTVs installed in the village* In Balod district the district administration head has motivated the villagers to install closed-circuit TV (CCTV) cameras in the lanes to capture images of anyone going outside their home to defecate<sup>4</sup>, totally disregarding the privacy of the villagers.

*Financial distress and its consequences* Even though the government is meant to provide some of the funds for constructing toilets, the money never arrives in time. People have to construct the toilets with their own money. Often the village heads are forced to advance money for toilet construction.

There has been a long delay in the release of funds from the central government to the state and consequently, from the state to the districts and below. This is despite that fact that the whole administration is engaged in this project and Employment Guarantee Scheme funds that were previously used

to build critical infrastructure like roads, ponds and improvement of farming land has been diverted for building toilets (Sharma, 2017).

The delays in the arrival of funds have caused great financial hardship for families and village heads who have been forced to construct the toilets with money they have arranged through borrowing or selling assets, resulting in a rise in rural indebtedness.

In one instance in Kanker district, 11 village heads became so indebted as a result of advancing money for toilets that they wrote to the government in desperation, threatening to commit suicide (Droliya, 2016b) unless the funds were released immediately.

There are media reports of families having been forced to migrate or become bonded labour in order to pay off the debts incurred through toilet construction (Ghose, 2017). A lady whose family had migrated in order to pay off the debts but were now being abused and harassed by the employer, told a reporter: “Tell me, do officials not care about us when they make their plans? What do these words sarkar (government), palayan (migration), Swachh Bharat mean if we die?” (ibid.).

One strategy that the government has employed in order to ensure universal toilet construction is to withhold funds unless all families in the village build toilets and the village is declared ODF. This is done in order to build peer pressure within the community. In Rajnangadon district it resulted in villagers beating their neighbour to death as he had been unable to construct a toilet due to lack of money. He had asked for some more time to arrange money to build his toilet. However, the Diwali festival was approaching and others in the village wanted to receive their funds in time for the festival. He became a scapegoat for their not receiving the funds on time, and was consequently beaten to death (Droliya, 2016c).

*Restrictions on participation in local panchayat elections* Chhattisgarh (among other states) modified the Panchayat Act (local self government Act) to make possessing a toilet a mandatory qualification for standing for the local panchayat elections (Jaiswal, 2015). This has been implemented in retrospect, with the existing elected panchayat members under threat of losing their seats if they did not construct toilets (Times of India, 2017a). Such a rule is bound to affect the participation of those from poorer and marginalised communities, including tribal and dalits, as often they are the ones without household toilets.

*Other concerns* While communities and families grapple with these problems, there are many other reasons to be concerned about the SBA. The first big issue concerns availability of water for the toilets and safe potable water. While on the one hand, toilets are being promoted, the situation with respect to water availability for the toilets remains bleak and that has implications for the women, already burdened with numerous other household tasks. Women now

have to fill and carry water for servicing the toilet, in addition to arranging water for cooking, drinking, washing, etc.

Another issue concerns cleaning of the toilets. This has been a caste-based role, with Dalits being forced to undertake this work. They have suffered centuries of indignity and discrimination as a result of this. The SBA does not acknowledge this as an issue nor try to address it (The Hindu, 2016).

There are also technical issues concerning the siting and construction of toilets such as contamination of drinking and underground water during monsoons where toilets and pits are sited inappropriately in terms of their drainage. Moreover, with proliferation of toilets in a village, it is no longer possible to maintain the recommended distance between toilets and the source of drinking water. This has serious public health implications. The past two years have seen a rise in cholera outbreaks in Chhattisgarh: the possible relationship with the current toilet building programme merits urgent investigation.

It is patently clear that there is an urgent need for the Indian government to review the way the sanitation programme is being rolled-out. An emphasis on dignity and respect for people must inform this programme and its perverse effects, especially on equity, must be recognised and eliminated.

### **‘Victim blaming’ is a constant feature of CLTS programs**

The stories related in the preceding sections do not represent a new trend in India, though it is likely that the coercive elements of the sanitation campaign have intensified recently. A 2011 report pointed to very similar coercive tactics being employed in the state of Karnataka. The report describes “squads of teachers and youths, who patrolled the fields and blew whistles when they spotted people defecating”. School children whose families did not have toilets were humiliated in the classroom. Men followed women – and vice versa – all day, denying people the opportunity even to urinate. Squads threw stones at people defecating. Women were photographed and their pictures displayed publicly. The local government institution, the gram panchayat, threatened to cut off households’ water and electricity supplies until their owners had signed contracts promising to build latrines (Chatterjee, 2011).

Neither is the phenomenon peculiar to India. A 2014 paper argued that the CLTS approach in Indonesia, was not only “inadequate” but also “echoes coercive, race-based colonial public health practices” (Engel and Susilo, 2014). A disturbing report from Bangladesh described how arbitration in rural Bangladesh was denied to young women and girls who were raped while openly defecating (Mahbub, 2009).

CLTS practitioners claim that the ‘shame’ spoken of in CLTS comes from self-critique and not from “externally imposed humiliation (to shame), and certainly not by the facilitators” (Musembi and Musyoki 2016). However, in practice, CLTS programmes in many countries appear to thrive on coercive



practices that often lead to gross violation of the rights of poor people. Clearly a course correction in the model of the CLTS programme is overdue.

## Notes

1 In a modification of the CLTS model, the government in India subsidizes the cost of toilet construction.

2 See Guidelines: <http://www.mdws.gov.in/sites/default/files/SwachBharatGuidelines.pdf>

3 Excerpts from Press Release by People's Health Movement-India on 19<sup>th</sup> June, 2017, full text available here: <http://phmindia.org/2017/06/19/press-release-isa-demands-an-end-to-vigilantism-in-the-name-of-the-swachh-bharat-abhiyan/>

4 See: <https://factordaily.com/cctv-cameras-open-defecation-swachh-bharat>

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