



NGOs role in sanitation sector

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THE SURVIVAL AND well being of a nation depend upon sustainable development, and for this, water supply and sanitation are essential requirements. An adequate supply of safe water and sanitation are, in turn, essential ingredients of a healthy and productive life. The former World Bank Chairman, Robert Macnamara, had remarked that for a better economic growth rate and higher productivity, priority has to be given to the health of the people, for which provision of public utilities like water supply and sanitation is necessary.

The benefits of safe water are limited without sanitation. Invariably it is the poor who suffer the most in the absence of safe water and sanitation. As a result, the debilitating effects of insanitary living conditions lower the productive potential of the very people who can least afford it.

The enormity of the problem can be gauged from the fact that nearly two billion people (about a third of the world's population) are without adequate basic sanitation facilities and by the year 2000, the number may increase to 3 billion. In India the situation is no different. More than 750 million people out of 950 million population either defecate in the open or use insanitary bucket/dry privies cleaned manually. The health implications of this state of affairs is appalling. It is responsible for 2.5 million child deaths per year in the entire world, countless lost days from schools and tremendous loss of nutritional status in growing children. Three to four lakh children die every year in India from diarrhoeal diseases which result from lack of proper sanitation.

The problem of human waste management is the single most potent source of insanitation, diseases and degradation of the environment. Open air defecation and use of bucket privies have led to the inhuman and unhealthy demeaning practice of manual collection and disposal of night soil by humans, which stigmatized a particular caste and was responsible for the social practice of "untouchability". This practice violates all norms of civilised society, and is a denial of human rights and dignity. It has been estimated that about four lakh scavengers are engaged in manually cleaning and carrying human excreta from about 76 lakhs bucket/dry privies in India, of which 54 lakhs are in urban centres.

In developed countries, the standard solution for the sanitary disposal of human excreta is water borne sewerage. Sewerage was first introduced in the world in London in 1850, followed by New York in 1860. Calcutta in India was the next city in the world to have this privilege

in 1870, yet only 232 towns/cities out of 4,700 have sewerage. None of them covers the entire city. Due to severe financial constraints and exorbitant cost, sewerage is not the answer to solve the problem of human waste management in India. A septic tank too is very costly and a common man can not afford to have it. Septic tanks, besides high cost, have many drawbacks and operational problems. As an example, for cleaning of septic tanks and disposal of sludge, the services of scavengers are needed as other labour would not handle it because of sludge being mixed up with fresh night soil, in which case the scavenging will continue.

The entry of Sulabh International Social Service Organisation into the arena of sanitation in the year 1970 gave a new turn to the sanitation programme in India. The organisation applied low cost, socio-culturally acceptable and affordable technology i.e. Sulabh Shauchalaya (twin pit pourflush toilet) in the field. But technology alone is not the answer. People's preceptions and attitudes on sanitation have to be changed. Public awareness and community participation is the most desirable thing to happen. And this can happen only when there is a massive national awareness followed by a strong and nationwide citizens' movement, like the one being currently spearheaded by Sulabh International Social Service Organisation.

Sulabh Shauchalaya

A little over 25 years ago, disturbed by the unsanitary conditions in the urban areas and moved by the social status of scavengers, the author studied various designs developed in the country and abroad and evolved a suitable technological option — Sulabh Shauchalaya (pourflush waterseal latrine with twin pits for on-site disposal of human excreta) to serve as an alternative to bucket privies and thus stop open air defecation. Sulabh Shauchalaya can be constructed even in the most congested areas of cities and towns. It is socio-culturally acceptable, affordable, easily available and users are able to operate and maintain it easily. It provides all the health benefits by safe disposal of human excreta on-site, which sewerage provides.

Sulabh Shauchalaya does not need the services of scavengers. It can be set up in different physical, geological and geohydrological conditions. It is environment-friendly and requires only 1.5 to 2 litres of water for flushing. This conserves water which is a scarce commodity. Due to its waterseal, it does not emit a foul smell. Sulabh technology

is sustainable, replicable, cost effective and most appropriate for improving the environment, ecology and health by converting bucket privies into pourflush toilets, constructing "individual" and "pay and use" community latrines where facilities are not available. The World Bank, UNDP, UNICEF, WHO, UNCHS, HABITAT etc. after a series of studies, have acknowledged that this technology is the most appropriate for developing countries to improve their environment and quality of life.

Sulabh Shauchalaya complexes

Community latrines are needed for those households which cannot afford to have individual toilets and in whose houses there is no space for construction of a toilet, and for commuters, pavement dwellers and other floating population. It is well known that community latrines do not exist in required numbers and even the existing ones are not maintained properly and are unsanitary, with the result people prefer to go in open for defecation rather using them.

For some years the author studied in depth the behaviour and attitude due to which people did not use the public toilets already available in the cities and towns. He felt that people would have no hesitation in using them and even pay for their use, if firstly, along with toilets, facilities for bathing and washing clothes could also be provided and secondly, they could be kept clean for all 24 hours of the day. Such a situation would be a boon for the women folk particularly. The author named these units as "Sulabh Shauchalaya Complexes".

In 1974, Sulabh introduced the system of operating and maintaining 'pay & use' community toilets with bathing, washing, laundry and urinal facilities round the clock with people's participation without any burden on the public exchequer or to the local authorities. Sulabh charges a nominal amount from the users. Children, disabled persons and those who cannot afford to pay are allowed to use the facility without charge. Use of urinals is free for all people. The earnings from the users are used for the operation and maintenance of community toilets.

The Sulabh Complexes are manned by attendants round the clock and have separate enclosures for men and women. These complexes have lighting arrangements to facilitate their use at night and 24 hours water supply. For washing hands, soap powder is provided to all the users free. Evergreen trees and shrubs are planted to create shade and to make the complexes pleasing. These also act as a buffer zone between the complex and the surroundings. They are designed architecturally to make them aesthetically attractive.

The system of operation and maintenance of community toilets evolved by the organisation has proved to be a boon for local bodies in their endeavour to keep the towns clean and improve the environment. This is a unique example of partnership of local authorities, non-Governmental organisations and the community.

Provision of Sulabh Shauchalayas in individual households as well as community facilities prevents indiscriminate open air defecation and improves the health and hygiene of the community and environment. Women and children are especially benefited because they are the worst sufferers. The Sulabh Shauchalaya complexes restore human dignity by providing facilities for defecation and bathing in privacy to those who are deprived of these amenities. A better quality of life follows, making the family conscious of the need for better health and environment within and outside their dwelling houses.

Sulabh has so far constructed/converted over 700,000 Sulabh Shauchalayas in houses and 3,000 public toilets providing sanitary facilities to about 10 million people in nearly 1,200 cities and towns spread over the entire country. Over 35,000 scavengers have been liberated from the task of manual scavenging and rehabilitated in other professions. About 3,500 wards and family members of the liberated scavengers have been given vocational training. Approximately 240 towns have been made "scavenging-free". There has been a dramatic, positive change in the physical environment of the towns where Sulabh has worked.

Community toilets linked with biogas plants

The human waste discharged into septic tanks from the Sulabh Shauchalaya Complexes was not being put to any use earlier. After studying various literature on the subject and discussing with the scientists in the field, the author proposed that a scientifically designed night soil digester be provided at each complex instead of a septic tank. This would provide an alternative source of energy as well as manure from the human excreta.

Sulabh is the pioneer organisation in India in the field of biogas generation from community toilet linked biogas plants. The organisation started its effort in 1982 when the first such biogas plant was set up at Patna. The biogas produced from human excreta at community toilets is being utilised for cooking, lighting, to supply warm water for bathing and providing fire for warming bodies during winters at the Sulabh Shauchalaya complexes. The biogas reduces the use of fuel wood and coal for cooking, the smoke from which is a major pollutant of the environment.

NGOs role in sanitation

Experience on the working of NGOs in the sanitation sector has revealed that they are an important resource for adopting innovative approaches and providing services to support sustainability and effective use. NGOs with trained workers have played the role of good activators and communicators. The workers have shown a sense of accomplishment and pride in their ability to do something significant to improve the lot of the community. Thus, NGOs are better equipped to ensure community participation for providing sustainable benefits to the people than is possible in other set ups.

While it is true that the Government has to play a major role, water supply and sanitation sectors need active involvement of NGOs. They are ideally suited to work as a link between the people's felt needs and the planning process. They can act catalysts of social change in bringing about a harmonious interaction between technology and social engineering. For activating this, people's participation has to be mobilised at grassroot level. The Government and NGOs both have to play a complementary role.

The NGOs working in the social development sector, which includes sanitation, have made Government supported programmes more responsive to the needs of the people. They have helped in organising communities to influence Government programmes that affect them. The advantage of NGOs is that they are in greater and closer proximity with target beneficiaries, creating greater trust between the Government and the people. They have shown greater commitment to improving the quality of life of the people and greater flexibility and responsiveness in operations.

The NGOs have encouraged people to realise their responsibilities in relation to sanitation and have made

them capable of taking action on their own. There is, therefore, a need to strengthen those NGOs which are doing good work. Further, the NGOs and Government agencies should work in close cooperation and in mutually inclusive ways to achieve results. This is specially true in the sanitation sector, because sanitation is a socio-cultural matter. The promotional work in the sanitation sector has to be done by NGOs, which carry greater conviction with the people than official agencies.

All this is amply reflected in the case of Sulabh International Social Service Organisation, whose abiding concern and spirited commitment to the cause of prevention of environment pollution by eradication of manual handling of human waste and stopping open-air defecation through low-cost sanitation has been recognised nationally and internationally. Sulabh's work has thus become a success story and snowballed into social movement of sanitation and social development. *It is heartening to note that "Cost Effective & Appropriate Sanitation Systems - Sulabh International Project" was recognised as a Global Urban Best Practice by the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements for the Habitat II City Summit held in June 1996 in Istanbul, Turkey.*