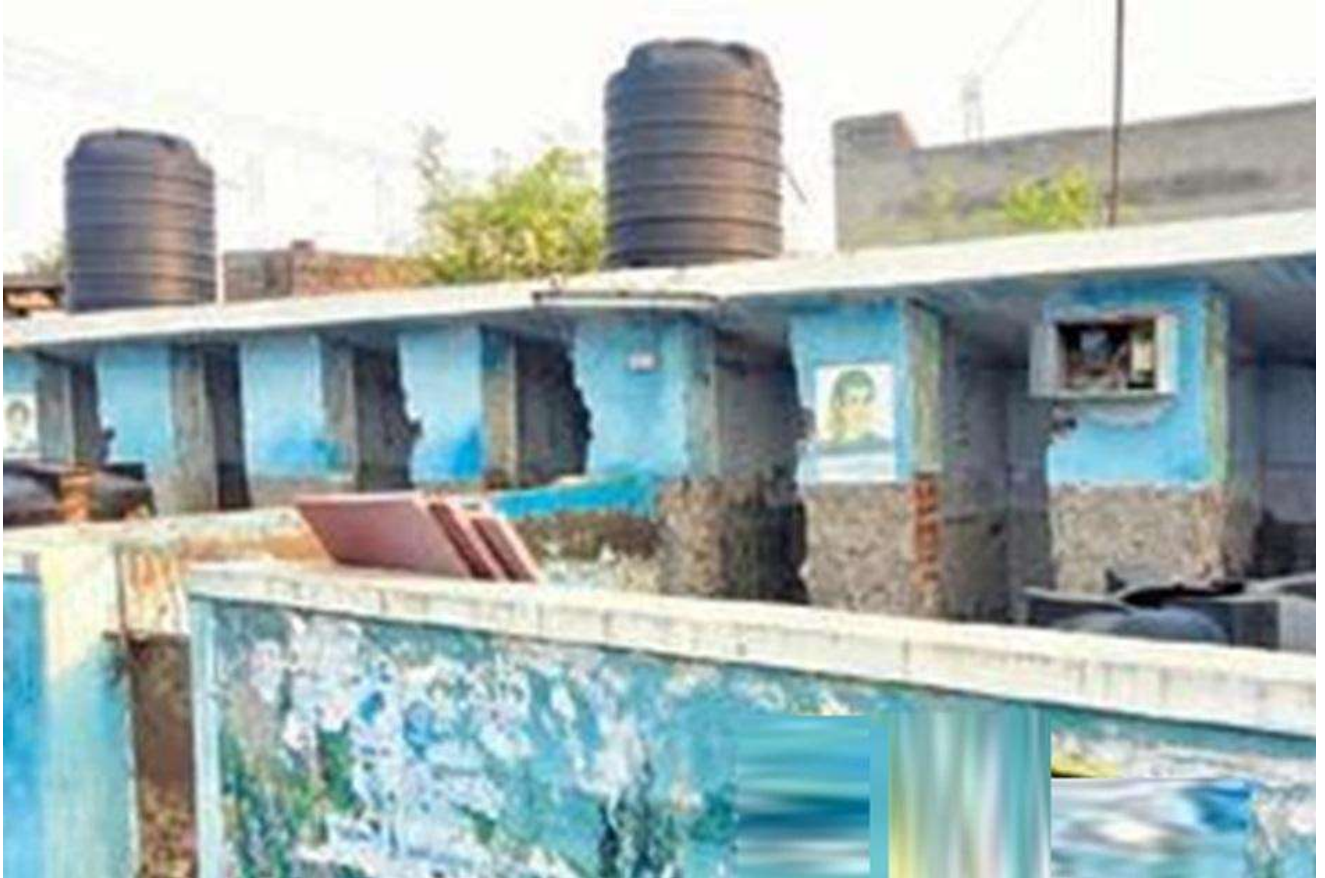


Toilet is part of individual dignity



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It is 98 years since Mahatma Gandhi said, “Sanitation is much more important than Independence for India.” Toilets are necessary absolutely for enhancing sanitation. Using toilets is not only a matter of individual health and welfare but also part of the country’s economic development. In this modern age, we have been achieving a host of things. But why has India not yet attained a universal progress in the matter of toilets.

No toilets

UNICEF and WHO say that half the world population, that is, 420 crore people either have no toilets or have unsafe toilets and 67.30 crore people still take to defecate in open. According to the UNICEF data, one out of seven persons uses open space for answering nature's calls.

A National Statistical Commission's report in India says, "Over one-fourth of the people have no toilet facilities." The report about drinking water, sanitation and housing facility says, "In villages, 28.7 per cent households do not have sanitation facilities and hence the people resort to open defecation."

In Jharkhand, almost 42 per cent of rural families have no sanitation facilities. This figure is 37 per cent in Tamil Nadu and 34 per cent in Rajasthan. The National Statistical Commission says, "96.2 per cent of urban families use toilets."

In schools

Former Union Minister of Education Ramesh Pokhriyal has said, "Over 15,000 schools in India hardly have toilet facilities." Tamil Nadu schools too have figured in the list. It is worth recalling that in 2020, the district education officers submitted to the Department of School Education a list of 2,391 schools without toilet facilities.

A report published in Forbes India has said that a survey held in 2020 revealed that 40 per cent of government schools have inadequate or unusable toilets. Almost 72 per cent toilets do not have sufficient water facility nor do they have a proper sanitation infrastructure. Hence 23 per cent of girl students drop out of school after they attain puberty.

Adverse consequences

The open defecation caused by the lack of proper sanitation facilities leads to water-borne diseases such as diarrhea, cholera, typhoid and so on. These diseases claim the lives of 4.32 lakh people annually in India and every day, 1,000 children below five years of age die of diarrhea, says UNICEF. Indian children do not meet the body mass standards of height according to weight. The main reason for their nutritional deficiency is their practice of openly defecating and avoiding the use of toilets.

The ill-maintained toilets are the breeding ground of diseases. Both government and people have a commitment to their maintenance. The need is dire now for setting up public toilets at railway stations, bus-stands, commercial complexes and temples.

Besides, the number of public toilets set up in the slums housing a large number of the poor people is also inadequate. The government must provide water and electricity facilities and also security in the toilets. The elderly people must get the facility of western-type toilets.

Economic loss

The Global Water Security and Sanitation Partnership, part of the World Bank, has informed that owing to the lack of proper sanitation facilities, the Indian economy loses Rs. 2.4 lakh crore annually, which is 6.4 per cent of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Untimely death, medical treatment expenditure, loss of working hours on account of diseases and loss of income also contribute to the economic loss.

The tourism sector is confronted with the annual loss of Rs. 1,200 crore because of the lack of sanitation. Every year Rs. 11,200 crore is spent on cleaning and purifying drinking water drawn from the waterbodies polluted by open defecation. Production loss is caused by unsafe and unhygienic drinking water and health issues caused by lack of sanitation in toilets. As a result, there is an annual economic loss of Rs.21,700 crore. Thus the adverse consequences of the lack of sanitation can be listed endlessly.

Need for toilets

The UN has declared sanitation as the fundamental right. So everyone has the fundamental right to sanitation facilities. Setting up of toilets enhances individual dignity, plays a great role in warding off diseases and improving the overall welfare and also accommodates women's security. It is an undisputed fact that lack of sanitation facilities in schools is a huge impediment to women's education. Upgrading of toilets reduces medical expenditure, protects water resources and environment, improves gender equality, prevents spread of water-borne diseases such as cholera, typhoid etc. and reduces infant mortality rate by stalling infections.

What's to be done

The UN has set a sanitation target of 2030 by which time, there must be a universal access to safe toilets with protected water facilities. But research says that the world must upscale its

efforts fivefold to attain the goal. The government says, "Six lakh villages in India were declared defecation-free from 2015 to 2020." Of course, the union and state

governments have been taking sanitation initiatives. But the efforts must still be intensified. Facilities must be created in toilets for girls' menstrual hygiene. Sanitation awareness must be spread among the student community.

A clear planning mechanism must be in place for maintenance of toilets which must have safe water, sanitation gadgets and sanitizers. All these facilities must be made accessible by the local bodies.

At the meetings at local body offices and gram sabhas, people must talk about the need for toilets. Complaint boxes can be installed at the existing toilets on which the officials should take action once in 10 days. Various new technologies must be deployed for simplifying the maintenance of toilets.

Toilets that need minimum water can be set up. It is common to see well-maintained toilets used free of cost at private hotels along the National Highways. But why are the public conveniences set up by the Corporations disgusting?

So, more attention to toilets issue is the need of the hour now in view of individual health and the need for avoiding the country's economic losses.

Translated by V. Mariappan.