

July 3, 2024

Cultural Behaviour and Sanitation Practices

By: Sujit Kumar Mishra, Amiya Kumar Sahoo, Pullanna Vidyapogu, D. Sivakumar

Many practical solutions on sanitation fail because they ignore cultural and social attitudes, and the role of caste. Therefore, promoting behavioural change among all castes and communities in India is crucial for successful sanitation interventions.

Open defecation poses significant health risks and environmental challenges in India, particularly in densely populated areas. While infrastructural improvements are crucial, it is also important to understand the cultural dimensions of open defecation to design effective interventions. It is often these factors that shape and impact the sanitation practices of different communities. As part of a larger project that studied the Swachh Bharat Mission, we interacted with participants from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and geographic locations in India – Odisha, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana – to obtain a nuanced understanding of the issue.

Location of facilities

On visiting a small hamlet in the Barpali block of Bargarh district in Odisha, we found that a large number of people were still practising open defecation. On enquiring, we learnt that plenty of water was available to them from a canal of the Hirakud Dam that passed through their village. A canal is an infrastructural facility that provides interlinked benefits to the communities residing in the surrounding areas. It often serves as a space where people can spend some time together.

The people of Barpali have adapted their sanitation practices in a unique manner. They normally used the canal for the purposes of defecation, bathing, dish washing, and fetching water during the day. Then, in the evening, women gathered at the location in groups. It had become a social occasion for them, spending time with each other after a hard day of doing household work, discussing their children's education, or emotional well-being.

|| The place where toilets have been built happens to be Ward 19 of Addanki municipality [Baptal district of Andhra Pradesh], which is beside a lake. So, though they have toilets, the men prefer to go to an open place to defecate.

The canal had, thus, transformed itself into a space that not only served the needs of sanitation but also allowed community-level bonding. Sometimes, social dynamics did give rise to tension, but the canal was also a space that provided room for resolution. Respondents from the village collectively said they were very comfortable with using the banks of the canal for defecation. They stated that they did not prefer toilets because they were used to using plenty of water for ablutions, which, they believed, was not possible in a small toilet.

In the Addanki peri-urban area of Bapatla district of Andhra Pradesh, open defecation was found to be a common practice, especially amongst men. Here, it is a cultural practice on the one hand, but also a failure of policy implementation on the other. The place where toilets have been built happens to be Ward 19 of Addanki municipality, which is beside a lake. So, though they have toilets, the men prefer to go to an open place to defecate. They continue doing so because, with time, open defecation has become a habit.

Social Taboos

An important concern to do with the non-usage of toilets in Jagannathpur village in the Boudh block of Boudh district in Odisha was menstruation. In this area, the wife of a younger brother does not directly interact with her husband's older brothers. When these women have their periods, the brothers-in-law in a joint family do not use the same toilets. People follow the same practice, irrespective of their relationship with the menstruating woman, in some tribal pockets of Sundargarh district in Odisha as well.

Interacting with the people of Jagannathpur village also revealed that they avoided using toilets if there were certain flowering plants near them because those flowers were used for worship. For them, offering "pure" flowers to their deity had more value than using these toilets. According to the people of Sardhapur village in the same district, they generally avoided using toilets attached to the main house, which had a designated space for religious worship. They, therefore, preferred open defecation.

Another crucial issue identified during field work at Bendripali and Sardhapur villages of Boudh district in Odisha was a prejudice about the direction the toilets faced. The people used toilets only if they faced north or south.

Another crucial issue identified during field work at Bendripali and Sardhapur villages of Boudh district in Odisha was a prejudice about the direction the toilets faced. The people used toilets only if they faced north or south. A large numbers of toilets that did not face in these directions were not used in these villages. Respondents from the same villages also said that nobody used indoor toilets during days of worship, especially on Thursday and Sankranti, when houses were cleaned for worship. To their mind, no “impure activities” should be allowed indoors.

Cause for concern

Manual scavenging is legally banned in India but the practice persists, pointing to how deeply entrenched the rigid rules of the caste system are and how limited the alternative livelihood options available to these low-caste people are. Historically, lower caste communities, such as Dalits or the Scheduled Castes (SCs) have faced discrimination and marginalisation in all aspects of life, including access to sanitation. Modern practices perpetuate the social stigma associated with lower-caste occupations and reinforce the marginalised status of these people.

In addition, the distribution of sanitation facilities is often inequitable between different caste groups across the country, and Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana are no exception. The lower caste communities, particularly in rural areas, often have inadequate access to toilets compared to higher caste ones. In many cases, they lack proper sanitation infrastructure altogether, which leads to open defecation and unhygienic living conditions.

There were instances in our field study that reflect the influence caste has on sanitation. Marthamma (28), a resident of Tubadu village of Nadendla mandal in Palnadu district of Andhra Pradesh belonged to an SC community and was working as an agricultural labourer. She also did household chores in an upper caste house in the village. She was Class 9 dropout and the mother of a girl child. The usual practice of workers in upper-caste households is to do all the cleaning, including removing human excreta. She was told many times to do the job but she avoided it, and finally told her employers that she would not do it.

The upper caste employers have now given this work to a Dalit person in the village who has been traditionally doing it for years. Till about a decade ago, house workers or servants in an upper caste house in the area were supposed to do whatever the owner asked them to. Now, in households where there are no Dalits employed to perform these duties, toilets have become dysfunctional. This is particularly true in communities where alternative systems for maintaining their sanitation arrangements have not been established.

The Budameru Madhya Katta slum of ward number 30 in Circle II, Vijayawada city, has people from all castes and communities. Other Backward Class castes (OBCs) are large in number, followed by the SCs and Scheduled Tribes, and there are a few who belong to other castes. However, all the castes share a similar economic status.

We have to understand that caste-based discrimination and exclusion in sanitation still prevail in many rural areas though more and more toilets have been built to achieve an open defecation-free status.

The cultural practices in sanitation in the slum can be observed at two levels. One is at the individual household level, where members of the family are responsible for cleaning their toilets. At the second level, the houses are rented out with shared toilet facilities to people of different castes. In such a scenario, nobody is responsible for cleaning the toilets that are used on a sharing basis. This soon leads to disuse of the toilets. There is also evidence in slums of toilets having fallen into disuse because of simmering social tensions.

We have to understand that caste-based discrimination and exclusion in sanitation still prevail in many rural areas though more and more toilets have been built to achieve an open defecation-free status. Villages in Telangana show that despite progress, the stigma associated with sanitation work and a reluctance to maintain toilets persist, which prevents all community members from participating in maintaining the sanitation infrastructure. So, this is a cause for concern.

Caste-based exclusion can be seen in community sanitation in places where lower caste individuals are excluded from the planning and decision-making processes, leading to an inequitable distribution of resources. The specific needs of the lower castes are not adequately addressed, and they are further marginalised in accessing sanitation services.

From a policy perspective, the exclusion of lower caste communities from decision-making processes related to sanitation is a serious issue. Ignoring their voices and limiting their role in local bodies responsible for sanitation planning and implementation is counter-productive.

This exclusion can result in sanitation facilities being unequally distributed amongst different caste groups, with lower caste communities often receiving inadequate or substandard sanitation infrastructure. As a result, these communities may face more problems in accessing clean water, have an insufficient number of toilets, and have to live with inadequate waste management systems. By excluding certain sections of society from participating in decision-making and implementation, valuable insights and local knowledge are likely to be overlooked.

Points to note

Effective sanitation is not only the result of administrative efforts but also the social behaviour of people, the place they are in, and also their caste. Many of the practical solutions of sanitation fail at the altar of cultural behaviour and social attitude. Promoting behavioural change amongst all castes and communities in India is therefore crucial for the success of sanitation interventions.

It is also important to integrate caste and gender-sensitive approaches to tackle the specific sanitation needs of girls and women such as menstrual hygiene management, and to dismantle the taboos related to menstruation.

From a policy perspective, the exclusion of lower caste communities from decision-making processes related to sanitation is a serious issue. Ignoring their voices and limiting their role in local bodies responsible for sanitation planning and implementation is counter-productive. Encouraging an open dialogue within communities about the benefits of sanitation and actively working to dispel myths can contribute to a cultural shift towards accepting household toilets.

This article has emerged from Including Environmental Sanitation in Sanitation Programmes: Evidence from Swachh Bharat Mission in Select Areas of Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha, a project conducted by the authors and sponsored by the Indian Council of Social Science Research, New Delhi.

Sujit Kumar Mishra, Amiya Kumar Sahoo, Pullanna Vidyapogu, and D. Sivakumar are with the Council for Social Development, Hyderabad.