

MAIDANDIH VILLAGE: Dignified Mornings

...

Recognizing that having a toilet within the premises of the house would most contribute to creating a dignified way of life, the women of Maidandih village collectively set about constructing these despite challenges and setbacks

It was regular for me to visit Maidandih village in Basmata *panchayat* of Katoria block to attend village-level meetings. At the end of one such *gram panchayat*-level Federation meetings, the women sat down to share their dreams. Most of the women talked of having a house where they could stay and live a comfortable and dignified life. Gradually, the women started discussing what they meant by a dignified life. The answers varied from woman to woman; slowly, however, a new dimension was added when they began to talk about the importance of having a toilet within the premises of the house. Having drinking water facilities in their home was also listed under the purview of what it meant to lead a dignified life although some women were hesitant to include this as one of the dimensions. Some of them considered staying healthy themselves, and helping others stay healthy came under the definition of a dignified life.

Women in rural India, as in most parts of the world, often suffer from lack of privacy and harassment, and have to walk long distances to find a suitable place for defecation, in the absence of toilet facilities

One of the women spoke of how hard it was for them to go to the toilet during the day. The intake of less water and waiting for each other to complete their household chores so that they could go together for security reasons were some of the problems voiced by everyone. They talked about the several health problems which arose due to the above habits. After a few hours, the group came to a common understanding wherein everyone concluded that one of the most important requirement for a dignified life was to have toilet facilities.

About 30 million persons in rural areas suffer from sanitation-related diseases. Five of the ten top killer diseases of children aged one to four in rural areas are related to water and sanitation. About 0.6-0.7 million children die of diarrhoea annually. Typhoid, dysentery, gastroenteritis, jaundice and malaria claim the lives of over a fifth of the children aged one to four in rural areas. The economic cost of man-days lost due to such diseases is estimated at Rs 1200 crores annually.

Rural sanitation figures prominently in the National Agenda for Governance. At present, the extent of sanitation coverage in India is around 16

per cent of all rural households. This figure is one of the lowest in the world, at par with countries like Nigeria and Afghanistan and possibly lower than Bangladesh. The absence of safe sanitation contributes significantly to the poor quality of life as reflected by well-accepted indicators such as infant mortality and morbidity rates.

India, one of the most densely populated sub-continent in the world, has the lowest sanitation coverage. In 1991, only about a tenth of the Indian rural population of about 627 million reported access to latrines (Census of India, 1991). By 2001, sanitation coverage in rural India had increased to about 36 per cent with 22 per cent in rural areas. As per the report of the Multiple Indicator Survey (MICS 2000), overall, toilets are used in 37 per cent of the households (19 per cent rural); 35 per cent (18 per cent rural) of the households have an improved sanitation facility (flush toilet connected to sewage, pour flush toilet, pit toilet, improved pit toilet or simple pit).

The poor, both in the rural as well as urban areas, bear a disproportionate burden of either non-availability of water or the water being of poor quality when

available. They often supplement public sources of water with supplies obtained at high prices from other sources. Women bear the physical burden of fetching water. Women and children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of water contamination. The burden of disease and the lost livelihood opportunities have tremendous adverse effects on the lives of the people in India, in general, and on the poor people living in the rural areas, in particular.

An additional concern, in the context of the above, relates to the differential burden the current situation places on women. Women in rural India, as in most parts of the world, often suffer from lack of privacy and harassment, and have to walk long distances to find a suitable place for defecation, in the absence of toilet facilities.

According to the NSSO's 54th round survey, members of households that did not have any latrine facility, that is, those using open areas as latrines, are known to wait till early morning or the night before venturing out in the open, causing health problems such as urinary tract infections.

In the next block-level Federation (Jagriti Mahila

SBM (Gramin) seeks to eliminate open defecation in rural areas by 2019 through improving access to sanitation. It also seeks to generate awareness and motivate communities to adopt sustainable sanitation practices, and to encourage the use of appropriate technologies for sanitation

Table 1: Percentage of Households without Latrines

State	Rural	Urban
Bihar	89.4	45.3

Source: NSSO Report No. 449

Sangh, Banka) meeting, two of the representatives got an opportunity to meet a representative of an NGO called NEEDS. NEEDS is the agency responsible for technical help and the implementation of the Lohiya Swachha Bihar Abhiyan (LSBA) at the district level. The representative of NEEDS shared the details of the LSBA programme. LSBA comes under the central scheme of Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM).

SBM, launched in October 2014, comprises two sub-missions — SBM (Gramin), to be implemented in rural areas, and SBM (Urban), to be implemented in urban areas. SBM (Gramin) seeks to eliminate open defecation in rural areas by 2019 through improving access to sanitation. It also seeks to generate awareness and motivate communities to adopt sustainable sanitation practices, and to encourage the use of appropriate technologies for sanitation. The Government of Bihar is committed to providing access to safe water and sanitation facilities. The Mission Swachh

Bihar lays emphasis on ‘collective behaviour change’ to adopt safe sanitation practices. The behaviour change is triggered through the community-led total sanitation (CLTS) approach adopted by the state. NEEDS is the agency responsible for implementing the scheme at the district and block levels. The NGO heard about Jagriti Mahila Sangh Federation in the block and is willing to engage with it in the mobilization process, to implement the scheme.

A block-level orientation was organized on 24 August 2016, headed by the Block Development Officer (BDO), a member from NEEDS, a representative from PRADAN, Federation representatives and PRI representatives—the *mukhiya*, the block *pramukh* and others. During the orientation, the approach and methodology of how the government plans to pay for the construction of individual household latrines (IHHLs) and how the entire village could work towards a people-led collective behaviour change intervention was outlined in detail.

The Federation representatives summarised the discussions that took place during the previous meeting of their Federation. Hearing this, the newly-selected PRI member voiced his apprehensions about the programme and about the funding, and spoke about the gap between the percentages of households willing and unwilling to contribute money. He believed that people would not be interested in such development (the construction of toilets) in their areas.

Another challenge in such an approach was that he thought individual households would possibly opt for toilet facilities but it was hard to get it through CLTS, in which the participation of each and every villager would be required. Finally, he concluded that his previous experience convinced him that the task would be impossible. While leaving, he commented, “*Sarkaar khane ke liye toh kuchh de nahi raha, pehle log khayenge tabhi naa sochalya jayenge* (The government doesn’t give us any food to eat; first we have to eat in order to use the toilets).” The enthusiasm of some of the Federation representatives dimmed when they heard the PRI representative. A plan was made to conduct such

Resistance from the men-folk was mainly to the idea of investing money. The women were keen about the idea because they would be the main beneficiaries

meetings in each *panchayat* of Katoria block.

A *panchayat*-level meeting was arranged on 3 September 2016 as decided in the block-level orientation meeting. A *panchayat*-level Coordination Committee was formed, the members of which were the Grameen Aawas Sahayak, the Rozgar Sewak, the Mukhiya, a school teacher and JMS Federation representatives, Chandrika *didi* and Saavitri *didi*. A meeting was scheduled to plan the roll out of the scheme.

No further meetings took place on the scheduled dates. The Federation representatives were present at the venue but the meeting was postponed again and again because of lack of attendance. Slowly, it seemed that no one was interested in the meeting. Further, in the *panchayat*-level Federation meetings, which were regular events of the Jagriti Mahila Sangh, both the Federation representatives shared the idea with SHG members of the Basmata *panchayat*. Both the representatives were convinced that it was a good idea to construct toilets and to benefit from the scheme shared during the block-level orientation.

Many SHG members were resistant to the idea because they thought that if the construction of a toilet in each household of the village was a prerequisite to enjoy the benefits of the entitlement, it would not be possible.

Chandrika *didi* recalled the discussion about the definition of a dignified life. Other members who were convinced said that this was an opportunity through which they could claim the entitlements as well as have a better life. Saavitri *didi* said, “*Sab mili ke karate to kahe na hotte* (If we come together, why would we not be able to do it)?”

Hearing this everyone said, “*Kari parbo, hoye jate* (We will be able to do it).”

The SHG members planned to meet to discuss the issue. After two or three meetings of the SHG(s) at the village level, all the women were convinced and were on board, considering it a golden opportunity. The next meeting was organized by the women at the village level, in which each and every member of the households was present. I also participated in the meeting. The women shared the idea about the LSBY scheme and explained how

the entire village could claim the entitlement; the requirement was just that the village should unite and think about each other and their neighbourhood.

One of the *dadas* responded, “*Kaise hotto, koi ameer chhe toh uh toh paisa lagai letto par koi bahut gareeb toh aukra se nai hotto* (Some are rich so they can contribute, but what about those who don't have enough to contribute)?” Hearing this, another *dada* said, “*Kii jarurat hai ghar mein sochalaya ke, koi dikkat nai chho* (What's the need of a toilet near the household? There is no problem).”

Resistance from the men-folk was mainly to the idea of investing money. The women were keen about the idea because they would be the main beneficiaries. I listened to the entire conversation till then.

I asked them, “*Dada, kab se aap log kamane bahar jate hain*, (Since when have you all been migrating for work)?”

The answer was, “For the last 20 years.”

I asked them why they did so.

The answer was, “To earn money and for better living conditions for the family.”

Having their own individual latrines was a dream. Slowly, the determination of the women and their convincing arguments for making toilets in their village resulted in the other members willingness to be part of the scheme

“And why did you dream of a better life?” I asked.

The women who had been all for the idea, so far, had lost their confidence and enthusiasm due to the resistance of the men folk. Hearing my questioning, they regained their voice.

Saavitri *didi* asked them, “*Tora sab ke achha jeevan khatir ghar me sochaalya jaruri nai lagey chho* (Don’t you feel that having toilets in our homes is one important component of a better life)?”

That statement boosted the other women’s confidence. All the women began talking, first in whispers and then in loud voices, about how hard it was for them to wait for dawn or dusk to answer the call of nature, resulting in humiliation and stomach ailments. Having their own individual latrines was a dream. Slowly, the determination of the women and their convincing arguments for making toilets in their village resulted in the other member’s willingness to be part of the scheme.

Chandrika *didi* requested me to help them liaison with the member of NEEDS so that the women could understand the technical aspects of the entitlement. With the active

participation of all, a village-level meeting was organized on 6 December 2016, where the members of the SHG, a representative of NEEDS (Tribhuanji), a few men and ward representatives from the villages were present. A detailed orientation was held on the technical part of the construction, the management of the work and the monitoring system. A control register was also a part of it, which would contain household details such as the Baseline number, BPL/APL number, bank account number and the current status (progress).

Their understanding helped them to categorize the contribution into: 1. Capital requirement of about Rs 12,000 for the construction of a toilet for each individual household latrine. 2. Total cost of (25 x 12,000 = 3 lakhs) for the village.

According to the NSSO survey, the contributions were categorized into four categories: 1. Money and labour 2. Money only 3. Labour only and 4. Neither money nor labour

Next, the villagers broadly defined the activities involved. These were:

1. Pit digging

2. Structure building
3. Pipe fitting of tap

The villagers were sure about the availability of labour because they readily agreed to help each other in pit digging and the construction of the structure, but the major challenge was the Rs 3 lakh capital for the entire village. A village-level meeting was arranged, wherein the agenda was to discuss how to arrange for the money. After a long discussion, the villagers identified the various sources of funds that they could tap into.

1. Contribution from each household member. But everyone did not agree to this because the daily earnings of most villagers were an average of Rs 200 each day and the contribution was not possible.
2. By private arrangement, that is, by asking for credit from local vendors and having the PRI representative to act as guarantor, giving the vendor assurance that as soon as the villagers get the money sanctioned from the government, they would return the money.

Labour was locally available in the village so the lead was taken by a few men, who formed

The women, as the driving force behind the initiative, formed a committee, the responsibility of which was to identify vendors for supplying material for construction

a committee to oversee the construction. Pit digging would be done individually by each family, with the help of each member of the family.

Everyone agreed to the second option. The women, as the driving force behind the initiative, formed a committee, the responsibility of which was to identify vendors for supplying material for construction (sand, cement, brick, asbestos, toilet fittings). A group was formed, in which two Federation representatives, Chandrika *didi* and Saavitri *didi*, took the lead, supported by other women.

When the women talked to the vendors for the material, the vendors' response was, "*Apne gaon ke kisi bhi Ward Sadasya, Mukhiya se kahne bolo, ham samaan de denge, aur ye sab kam ke liye gaon ke mard ko kaho* (Ask any member such as the Ward Member or the Mukhiya to act as guarantor. I will give the material but you ask a male member of your village to do these activities). *Tum auraton ka bharosa kya* (There's no trusting you women)."

The women smiled each time and did not lose hope. They would say, "*Himmat nai harbo, koi naa koi toh hum auraton par bharosa kartoh* (Let us not lose hope.

Surely we will be able to convince some vendor who will trust us women)."

During my visits, I helped them to reflect over all the tasks which, at first, had seemed impossible for them but because of their active participation and confidence had been made possible.

Talking and sharing about the Mahadhiveshan, there would be a smile on the women's faces, It was as if they were saying, "*Hum sab akela ney chho dada dekhlo ney peechlaa saal kitta didi raho, jarurat partoh toh sabke madad lebo, sab jaetee toh de dukaandaar maantoh naa* (We are not alone, if required we will ask all the women to help us to assure the vendors)."

Finally, one vendor was willing to trust them but wanted a PRI representative such as a Ward Member, a Mukhiya or any prestigious person such as the BDO as a guarantor. The women went to the Ward Member because they had already seen that the Mukhiya had many apprehensions about the scheme. The Ward Member heard the women and then asked them, "*Kitna ka samaan hai?*" Chandrika *didi* replied, "*3 lakh ka.*"

He then asked, "*Kaise lautaoge itna paisa* (How will you return the money)?"

Chandrika *didi* said, "*Jab sauchalaya ban jayega toh hum BDO ko bulayenge aur phir wo paisa milne par lauta kar denge* (When the toilets are constructed, we will tell the BDO. We will give you the money we get from him and clear your debt)."

The Ward Member said, "*Tum aurat sab ke kahe se gaon mein BDO aeto, kabhiyo nai aeto tor gaon, jao sab apne ghar* (You believe that the BDO will listen to you women and come to the village? He will not come. Go back to your homes)."

The entire group took it as challenge and went directly to the BDO to ask him to tell the vendor to give the material. The BDO provided assurance to sanction the scheme if the people were to focus on collective outcomes but he did not want to act as guarantor. Once again, the women went to the vendor saying that, "*Koi guarantee nahi de rahal chho par hum sab gaon ke log mil ke paisa lauta deboh* (No one is ready to give a guarantee, but trust us, we villagers together will return the money)."

The vendor agreed but only after adding a new clause that he would lend the money for one month. After one month, he would charge an interest at the rate of 10 per

The villagers helped each other, and within the stipulated time-frame, they were able to complete the construction. The vendor himself visited the village and was astonished at the unity of the village

cent. The women returned and arranged a village-level meeting and shared what the vendor had said. Resistance from a few of the men began. They were not ready to take the risk. One *dada* said, “*Ki hottoh agar ek mahina mein kaam pura nahi hotto, hum sab karz se lad jaabo* (What will happen if the work is not completed in one month? And, if the money is not sanctioned, we all will be burdened with the debt).”

Everyone said that the making of 25 individual household latrines within the deadline was a high

risk activity. Taking a loan at such a high rate would make them indebted. The unity of the village was at stake once again. Some of the families were not ready to bear the risk. However, 14 families were convinced about the idea.

The Federation members once again called a meeting at the village level, trying to convince the families to take a risk. Finally, all of them agreed. They broke down the activity into different components along with a deadline. The targets were set.

Each household was to complete pit digging within four days. After the pit digging activity, two of the families decided not to participate any further. According to them it was waste of labour days where the entire family was engaged in such an activity. As all the members were in the SHG, the Federation helped to create pressure upon them at the village level. A group of masons contributed their labour to complete the activity. Technical training by the NEEDS representative, Sandeepji, helped



SHG members monitoring the work in progress in the village

The Federation representatives took the lead by inviting the BDO. He visited the village on the scheduled date and sanctioned the payment of the entitlement. The entire village was beaming with positive energy

these labourers to understand how to lay the pipe fittings.

The villagers helped each other, and within the stipulated time-frame, they were able to complete the construction. The vendor himself visited the village and was astonished at the unity of the village. The Federation representatives were busy collecting all the documents from each family for the sanction of the scheme within a deadline.

When collecting the documents, the Federation leader realized that there were some hurdles. They required the ration cards, with ration card numbers, which were easily available but the Above the Poverty Line (APL)/ Below the Poverty Line (BPL) list was not available for all. A village-level meeting was arranged, asking people's help to get the list. The men began to grumble saying, "*Itna aasan nai hoye chhe sarkar se paisa lewe mai* (It is not so easy to get the money from the government)."

All the women shouted in chorus, "*Itna ho gael chhe toh woho hoyeiyi jaete* (If so much has been

possible, we will be able to do that also)." Seeing the confidence, Pradeepji (an important person in the *panchayat*) readily agreed to arrange the list.

The list was arranged and the ground-level preparation of collecting all the documents was done by Federation representative. Only four days were left and about seven individual household latrines were still left to be constructed. The heartbeats of all the villagers were increasing but, the spirit of 'unity is strength' was reflected in the efforts of the villagers. Each and everyone extended help to complete the construction within the deadline. I was impressed and inspired by the unity of the village and the words of the PRI member, who said, "The saying that all people are interested in their own well-being rather than of their neighbourhood seems completely false in this village."

The village set a live example of successfully completing a task within a deadline. The Federation representatives took the lead by inviting the BDO. He visited the

village on the scheduled date and sanctioned the payment of the entitlement. The entire village was beaming with positive energy. The villagers received the money in their account as per the deadline. The women returned the loan to the vendor within the time limit of one month. The vendor said, "*Maine nahi socha tha ki ek mahine ke andar ho payega* (I never thought that you would be able to complete the work in one month)."

The women of Maidandih gave a message to the surrounding villages, 'Where there is a will, there is a way'. The villagers readily extended themselves, setting an example for the other villages such as Banarerth, Barnpur and Rangiya to replicate the entire process.

Smiles were seen on their faces as each member shared their struggles, ups and downs, their anxiety, curiosity and sense of achievement in creating 'dignified mornings for Maidandih'.

—

Vimal Kumar Yadav is based in Katoria, Bihar