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DEVELOPMENT-INDIA: Celebrating Sanitation

By Keya Acharya



KURUKSHETRA, Haryana State, Dec 4 (IPS) - Everywhere there was the seductively deep bass sound of Indian drums as crowds of local villagers shouted 'Jai Swachhta' (long live cleanliness) and punched the air.

Small elevated mud pathways dividing black fields dotted with stone and mud houses facing drying mounds of grain stalks were crowded with celebrating villagers, mostly women swathed in red, orange and multiple-hued saris.

The men sporting traditional headgear, magnificent turbans in orange or white, stood ready to greet visitors to their village.

Their chants of Jai Swachhta are now a slogan in these bylanes and elevated pathways of about half of Kurushetra's 418 villages.

It also means that these villages are now 'open defecation free', snazzily called 'ODF' in expert international circles dealing with bringing toilets to the world's developing and under-developed nations.

Kurukshetra is well-known in Indian mythological history, its plains the scene of an epic battle fought between two feuding families in the famous 'Mahabharata', carvings of which are etched in places as far away as Angkor Vat, the seat of Hinduism in South-east Asia till around the 15th century.

But that past glory has been eclipsed in modern times by a lack of awareness on the need for sanitary hygiene and toilets in every home, even though the district is a fairly prosperous one.

As per UNICEF, only 22 percent of rural populations and 59 percent of urban populations in India had access to adequate sanitary facilities until 2004.

Chris Heyman of the World Bank's Water and Sanitation programme for South Asia, based in New Delhi, says that " the principle issues are not about pipes and technology, but on finance, politics and behaviour change. Infrastructure won't work unless behaviour changes".

India and the south Asian nations of Bhutan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Maldives and Afghanistan are pledged, since 2004, to urgently achieve safe sanitation for all besides being signatory to halving the numbers without access to safe sanitation by 2015, as per the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

India's Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, told the 3rd South Asian conference on sanitation, held late November in New Delhi, that bringing sanitation to the 2.6 billion people of South Asia, including one billion children, was a 'major challenge'.

But India's seriousness in dealing with the situation is seen in the fact that country dramatically increased budgetary allocation in the last two 5-year plans.

UNICEF says India's 'Total Sanitation Campaign' is currently operational in 578 of India's 600 rural districts, with 48 percent of rural populations having access to toilets and sanitation services and aiming to achieve full coverage by 2012, ahead of the MDG's scheduled 2015.

And Kurushetra illustrates this well. " There are hundreds of success stories here", says the district's additional deputy commissioner, Sumedha Kataria, a dynamic government official who terms her drive to achieve total sanitation as a 'jihad', or holy war.

In Bishengarh village, a group of eleven 'sarpanch' or headmen of their 'panchayats', each comprising a cluster of villages under the government's decentralised rural-administration system, speak of how they got their panchayats to stop open defecation.

Sudesh Kumar, the headman, or 'sarpanch', of the Bishengarh 'panchayat' which encompasses a cluster of villages under the government's decentralized rural-administration system, says he was interested in cleaning up his panchayat when he heard Kataria speaking about diseases due to the age-old practice of open-defecation.

"Dhire, dhire, lok tho jur gaye", (people gradually got together) said Kumar in Hindi, explaining how he went door-to-door eliciting cooperation in building their own toilets.

Tara Devi from Kolhapur says that the surroundings of her panchayat had become so offensive that people could not walk about freely. But gradually she and the others managed to convert the entire population to construct toilets and use them.

Kurukshetra has 378 panchayats, 108 of which received India's Nirmal Gram Puraskars for their success in achieving sanitation.

Kataria says her target is to make all 378 panchayats ODF ones by 2009, saying her motivation 'to deliver' has also been spurred by media attention on the issue in Kurukshetra.

Premier Singh says the Nirmal Gram Puraskars awards are providing a healthy community incentive in making the need for sanitation a "priority concern".

The Indian government provides finances for the construction of toilets for people identified as living below the poverty line (or on one meal a day or less), and part-subsidises other households.



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Kataria got help from the Jindal Foundation, an NGO linked to the Indian steel company, Jindal, for constructing more toilets – simple, but concrete pit latrines, dug at levels higher than groundwater tables to avoid contamination.

(END/2008)

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