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Trifling toilets, tremendous effects

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— UNICEF

THE passenger of a train, Akhil Chandra Sen, once wrote a letter to the higher railway authority concerned on July 2, 1902 about 120 years ago. The content of the letter centred around health and sanitation hazards during train journey. My readers are requested to overlook the grammatical part of the letter — presented verbatim — and, rather, concentrate on its contents:

‘Respected Sirs,

‘I am arrive by passenger train Ahmedpur station and my belly is too much swelling with jackfruit. I am therefore went to privy. Just I doing the nuisance that guard making whistle blow for train to go off and I am running with lotaah in one hand and dhoti in the next when I am fall over and expose

all my shocking to man and female women on platform. I am got leaved at Ahmedpur station. This too much bad, if passenger go to make dung that dam guard not wait train five minutes for him. I am therefore pray your honour to make big fine on that guard for public sake. Otherwise I am making big report to papers.

‘Your faithful Servant,

‘Okhil Chandra Sen’

En passant, we are told that the Far Eastern Economic Review published this letter that is still kept in the railway museum in New Delhi and toilet system in trains has reportedly been introduced since then.

We will come back to sanitary situation of India soon, but before that, let us put some global statistics first. ‘Poor sanitation, including hygiene, caused at least 120 million disease episodes and 50,000 premature deaths annually. The resulting economic impact was more than US\$3.3 billion per year. The associated economic costs of polluted water attributed to poor sanitation exceeded US\$1.5 billion per year.... Around the world, over 800 children under age five die every day from preventable diarrhea-related diseases caused by lack of access to water, sanitation and hygiene.’

The sanitary situation in India has not possibly changed much since Akhil Sen wrote the letter 120 years ago despite an enviable economic progress that India has passed through. The condition is so critical that Nobel laureate Amartya Sen had to urge left parties of India to raise the issue of sanitation and other basic needs of the poorest of the poor, apart from issues of food security and liquefied petroleum gas price increase. The economist estimates that about a half of the households in India have no toilets and people have to resort to open defecation. Arguably, open defecation is 1 per cent in China and 9–10 per cent in Bangladesh.

‘Half of all Indians have no toilet. In Delhi when you build a new condominium there are lots of planning requirements but none relating to the servants having toilets. It’s a combination of class, caste and gender discrimination. It’s absolutely shocking. Poor people have to use their ingenuity and for women that can mean only being able to relieve themselves after dark with all the safety issues that entails.’

In support of governmental campaigns to improve sanitation conditions in India, with an emphasis on the eradication of open defecation especially in rural areas, various campaigns are being carried out. ‘Toilet: Ek Prem Katha’ (Toilet: a love story) is a 2017 Indian Hindi-language comedy-drama

film produced to popularise the use of sanitary toilet. Allow me to pick up the story in a nutshell and, at times, paraphrased:

The story goes that the newly wedded bride Jaya reluctantly goes to a field to defecate, but comes back agitated without defecating and complains about it to her husband. 'He makes a couple of temporary adjustments to solve the problem, first taking her to a neighbour's house which has a portable toilet for a bedridden elderly woman, and later in a train that has a seven-minute stop at the village railway station, without actually constructing a toilet in his house, but after a while, one day she gets locked up in the toilet and train departs the station and agitated and frustrated Jaya leaves Keshav and moves back to her parents' house to file for a divorce citing the unavailability of a toilet in her husband's house as the primary reason.

As hinted earlier, Bangladesh did better than India in terms of sanitation acknowledged by Amartya Sen himself: 'Bangladesh is much poorer than India and yet only 8 per cent don't have access to a toilet.... This is India's defective development.... What's the purpose of a development model that produces luxury shopping malls rather than sanitation systems that ensure millions of healthy lives,.... India is caught in the absurd paradox of people having mobile phones but no toilets.'

There is no doubt that at least in the case of toilets in rural areas and sanitary system, India thinks today what Bangladesh thought yesterday. Bravo Bangladesh but UNICEF suggests to do more arguing that 'Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in eliminating the practice of open defecation. But climbing the 'sanitation ladder' still represents a challenge.' The problems are, à la UNICEF, as follows:

- (a) The practice of effective hand-washing, the most effective hygiene behaviour, is very low; just about 59.1 per cent of people practise hand-washing with water and soap at critical times.
- (b) Only about two out of five households practise safe disposal of child faeces, despite implications that lead to illness and death of children.
- (c) Even though 84 per cent of schools have toilets, only 24 per cent are improved and functional and clean while only 45 per cent are unlocked.
- (d) Sanitation facilities sensitive to the needs of disabled children are lacking.
- (e) Disparities in access to sanitation facilities vary between the rich and the poor. Such gaps are also geographical and based on gender. People living in poor households are 10 times more likely to use unimproved sanitation than those living in the richest households.

Thus a toilet may be a trifling tool, but it has tremendous effects on socio-economics, even human on lives.

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