

Culture and Sanitation in Small Towns

An Ethnographic Study of Angul and Dhenkanal in Odisha

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In the current sanitation policy discourse, cultural norms of purity and pollution are considered major obstacles to toilet use, leading to an emphasis on behavioural change. A recent study of slums in Angul and Dhenkanal—two small towns in Odisha—shows that culture does not operate in isolation. It is determined by multiple factors such as the availability of physical space in urban areas, the resources to be invested, essential infrastructure such as water, and accessible, cost-effective technology. There are aspects of culture that people compromise on, but certain cultural norms are non-negotiable. This calls for a decoding of the cultural determinants of sanitation.

A global study indicates that one billion people—15% of the world's population—practise open defecation (OD), of whom 626 million live in India (UNICEF-WHO 2012). As per the 2011 Census of India, only 46.92% of households (30.74% rural and 81.36% urban) in India have latrines, while 49.84% (67.32% rural and 12.63% urban) practise OD. Data from the 2011 Census on types of latrines organised by city size indicate that as the size of a city decreases, dependence on on-site sanitation and OD increases (Housing and Urban Development Department 2017). The Census also indicates that Odisha, with an urban population of 42 million and high decadal population growth, lacks toilet coverage for 35.2% of its urban households. More than 33% of Odisha's urban populace defecate in the open.

OD, however, is not only practised by those lacking toilet facilities. Even among those who have toilets, some prefer OD. Diane Coffey et al (2015) found that in some rural areas in North India, people do not use the standard pit latrines prescribed by the World Health Organization (WHO). United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)-WHO data shows that the practice of OD is related neither to education and literacy status nor to poverty.¹ The reluctance of the Indian poor to use toilets, and their preference for OD, poses a sanitation puzzle; this paper seeks a possible clue to this puzzle in the cultural practices of Hindus.

Studies on rural Indian society indicate the influence of sociocultural factors like caste, and the related norms regarding purity and pollution, on sanitation behaviour (Bean 1981; Coffey et al 2015; Dube 1958; Khare 1962; Luthi 2014; Srinivas 1952). However, not many studies have focused on the effects of the same sociocultural factors on sanitation in urban areas. These factors are especially pertinent in the context of small cities like Angul and Dhenkanal that are located close to villages and fall within the rural-urban continuum. Besides, understanding regional cultural behaviours pertaining to sanitation could also provide insight into sanitation practices in small cities.

This study attempts to provide an ethnographic understanding of urban sanitation in two small cities. The overarching question it addresses is: To what extent, and in what ways, do sociocultural norms, behaviours, and practices influence the toilet behaviour of the poor in small towns? The study argues that culture is not an isolated phenomenon. It interacts with other aspects of sanitation, such as the availability of physical space, financial resources, infrastructure, technology, and governance. Culture influences and is influenced by these

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factors. Angul and Dhenkanal are caught on the cusp of tradition and modernity, where both coexist. Thus, both these forces determine many of the sanitation practices and behaviours in the two towns.

Locations of the Study and Methodology

This section contains details about specific locations where the study was conducted as well as the methodology followed.

City profile: Angul is an industrial city surrounded by a number of public- and private-sector mining companies. The district, however, is predominantly rural, with only 17% of its population residing in urban areas. Angul Town became a Notified Area Council (NAC) in 1955, and it was extended in 1977 to include two villages—Hulurisingha and Baniabahal—and a part of the Turanga Forest. It became a municipality in 2008. It covers over 19.24 sq km and has 23 municipal wards.

Dhenkanal is an administrative city. Dhenkanal District is predominantly rural, with a few mining-based industries. Dhenkanal Municipality was constituted in 1951, covering the village Nizigarh, or Dhenkanal Town. Subsequently, 12 more revenue villages were included in the municipality in 1975. The Dhenkanal Municipality has 23 wards.

Both Angul and Dhenkanal are small towns in Odisha, with an urban population of 43,794 and 67,414, respectively, including a Scheduled Caste (SC) population of 5,039 and a Scheduled Tribe (ST) population of 1,473 in Angul; and a 11,105 SC population and 4,095 ST population in Dhenkanal. The slum populations in Angul and Dhenkanal are 10,950 and 7,821, respectively (Census 2011).

Data from the 2011 Census reveals a dismal sanitation situation in both these towns, with OD as high as 35% in Angul and 39% in Dhenkanal. In Angul, 64% of the households have latrines within their premises; in Dhenkanal, the figure is 59.8%. About 43% of these households in Angul have on-site sanitation facilities, such as septic tanks and other systems, while in Dhenkanal, 48% of households with latrines have these facilities.

About 42% of urban households in Angul and close to 23% in Dhenkanal have access to tap water from treated sources, while 58% of households in Angul and 53.4% in Dhenkanal have a source of drinking water within their premises.

Methodology: The urban poor in Angul and Dhenkanal live in slums and mostly belong to lower castes and tribal groups. The spatial and socio-economic segregation of city spaces has led to the creation of specific sites that are critical for the study of sanitation facilities (or their absence) in poor households and the perceptions and behaviour of the poor towards sanitation.

The slums in this study were selected to include those that are authorised and unauthorised;² inhabited by SCs or STs predominantly, as well as those inhabited by a more diverse caste mix (mixed caste), located on canal banks, in the vicinity of forests, and under the Integrated Housing and Slum Development Programme (IHSDP).³ Ten of 27 slums in Angul and 11 of 17 in Dhenkanal were selected for this study.

Altogether, the study covered nine SC slums, six ST slums, and six mixed-caste slums.

The study used ethnography to explore cultural behaviours, perceptions, and practices. Additionally, the researchers physically surveyed sanitation infrastructure and had discussions with municipality officials and non-governmental organisation (NGO) representatives working on sanitation in the two cities.

Description of the Slums Studied

This section provides socio-economic as well as cultural description of the slums studied.

Slums in Dhenkanal: While some tribal slums in Dhenkanal are inhabited exclusively by a single tribe, such as the Juang or Sabar tribes, others have a more mixed tribal population. Some tribal slums also have a few SC and Other Backward Classes (OBC) households. These slums are quite old, dating back more than 60 or 70 years, according to their inhabitants. Landownership is an issue here, as some households do not own the land they are living on. All tribal slums are situated close to forests and largely feature mud houses. All of them, including those who have IHSDP houses containing toilets, defecate in the open.

The slums inhabited by SCs are either dominated by a single caste or comprise of mixed castes, with a majority of SC households. Single-caste slums are inhabited by the Hadi, Ghasi, and Mehtar, the lowest in the caste hierarchy who work as sweepers in the city municipality and in industries, hospitals, and hotels. In mixed-caste slums, the sweeper castes live with other SCs. There are also a few Sabar households in the slums. Although different castes live together in the same slum, they have segregated hamlets. Even among the SCs, those from the sweeper caste are considered untouchable. They are ostracised in social interactions around matrimony and the sharing of cooked food. It is worth noting that untouchability is a practice that discriminates against a caste as a whole, that is, even if a low caste person is not currently working as a sweeper, they are still considered an untouchable.

Slums in Angul: While the SC-populated slums in Angul are exclusively inhabited by a single caste, mixed-caste slums are inhabited by upper castes, OBCs, and SCs. Due to spatial constraints, their houses are constructed in close proximity to each other, and their daily social interactions are not hampered by caste. Yet, untouchability manifests in other ways. SCs are not allowed to enter the kitchens of upper-caste households or touch their utensils. Thus, they maintain the social restrictions of marriage and food. Caste rigidities are relaxed during festivals, which are considered a public space. Most mixed-caste slums that the study covered are situated on canal banks, indicating they are populated by migrants to the city. Angul has only one tribal slum exclusively inhabited by the Kandha (also known as Khond) tribe.

Occupations of Slum Households: Male slum residents in both towns are engaged in a variety of occupations. They may be construction workers, painters, auto or trolley drivers,

masons, weavers, fish sellers, daily wage workers in shops and markets, municipal or privately hired sweepers, or small business owners. The slum residents in Dhenkanal also work as agricultural labourers and cultivate land as sharecroppers. In Angul, many slum residents work in industries. Slum women may work as daily wage workers or domestic help or may own small shops that stock groceries and snacks. Tribal women in Dhenkanal, however, do not work as domestic help. They gather wood and twigs from the forest, which they sell in the market.

Spatial geography of slums: The spatial geography of these slums is socio-economically determined. In Angul, slums that have come up due to migration accommodate the poor in the periphery of the city—spaces that are either abandoned or uninhabitable, such as the banks of canals and the sides of drains. These are unauthorised slums, which, in official parlance, are sites that have been illegally occupied. While they receive basic amenities such as ration cards, roads, water, and electricity, their right to the land is not recognised.

The very geography of their place of habitation separates slum residents from other city dwellers, setting them apart as a group with no possibility of inclusion in the better, more liveable parts of the city. In slums that coexist with non-slum areas, it is not uncommon to find the homes of economically well-off populations in close proximity to slums; however, these buildings stand out as different in socio-economic status rather than integrating with the slum. The poor, those of lower castes, and tribal people live in specific areas marked by social and economic exclusion and marginalisation. The slums position these populations as distinct, making them eligible for only certain municipal services.

Purity and Pollution

Traditional norms of purity and pollution are crucial in determining sanitation practices in India. As the aforementioned studies indicate, rural areas are still governed by these norms to a large extent, but some of them have been relaxed in the urban context due to spatial constraints. Additionally, urban spaces have adopted modern notions and technologies of sanitation that have influenced their sanitation practices.

Douglas (1966) views pollution as intrinsic to cultures and argues that there are norms of prohibition that revolve around it. Hindu norms of pollution and purity have many dimensions that centre on connotations of dirt and pollution, purity and cleanliness, physical spaces as pure or impure, and the human body as a site of purity and impurity.

Dirt: There are two connotations of dirt: physical dirt, such as human excreta and garbage, and cultural dirt, such as that associated with menstruation, birth, and death. Dirt is viewed as polluting and disorderly. Consequently, cleanliness is considered pure and orderly (Bean 1981; Luthi 2014; Srinivas 1952). A Hindu household keeps dirt out for both physical and cultural reasons. Sometimes, the boundary between physical and cultural dirt is thin. Human excreta is considered physical dirt, but even when modern toilet technologies make the dirt

invisible and destroy its toxic potential, toilets are still considered “unclean” by Hindu households. Therefore, toilets are built at a distance so as not to pollute the pure, such as food cooked in the kitchen, and sacred spaces where deities are kept for household worship.

Not only is human waste considered defiling and impure, the body also becomes impure during the process of defecation, which is a release of dirt. Both men and women are required to bathe after defecation so that their bodies are purified. However, a child’s body is not considered ritually impure, and children’s excreta can, therefore, be thrown down the drain or covered with soil.

Space: The inner space of the house—personal or family space—is to be kept pure and well-ordered, whereas the outer space, which is communal, can be impure and chaotic (Gupta 2000; Luthi 2014). The purity of the inner space must be guarded by assigning separate spaces to different kinds of dirt: the toilet is kept outside the house, shoes are left outside the entrance, and menstruating women stay away from spaces of worship and cooking. The inner space is ritually purified following the pollution of birth or death. Similarly, the body has to be purified through a ritual bath after menstruation.

The living space of the house is sacrosanct because it constitutes two sacred spaces—the place of worship and the place of cooking—both of which are to be kept pure by following the prescribed norms. As women are assigned the responsibility of maintaining the purity of the inner space, they have to bathe in the morning before their household chores so that they are ritually pure to worship or to cook.

Caste: Caste is at the heart of pollution and purity among Hindus (Bean 1981; Dumont 1970; Khare 1962; Srinivas 1952). The castes that deal with materials considered polluting—human waste, dead bodies, dirty clothes, human hair, and the hide of dead animals—are considered impure and untouchable. Those who deal with human waste and dead bodies are considered the “lowest of the low” and work as sweepers and scavengers, and are the traditional bearers of night soil. The castes rendered untouchable⁴ live in hamlets on the outskirts of villages, away from the upper castes. In cities, they live in peripheral, common places such as railway lines and river banks, close to morgues and slaughterhouses (Guru 2000).

Traditionally, the upper castes never cleaned their own toilets. This practice still continues in different forms. In a Rajput village in Jaunsar–Bawar, toilets were abandoned because the untouchable Kolta caste lived far from the village and could not come there regularly to clean the toilets (Khare 1962). In another telling instance, untouchable sweepers were brought from another city to handle dead bodies in the aftermath of the tsunami in Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu (Dutt 2016).

Caste also assigns differential physical constituents to the human body. Lower-caste bodies are considered impure and are thought to be filled with *tamaguna* (*tama* means evil or dark; *guna* means element), whereas upper-caste bodies are considered pure (Davis 1976). Untouchables are, thus, not only

prohibited from entering the inner spaces of upper-caste houses, they are also prohibited from polluting the bodies of the upper castes through food and marriage. The upper castes do not eat food cooked by lower castes, or marry them. The casteist notion of cleanliness is thus more social than physical (Milner 1987). Social order is maintained through ritual cleanliness, which may not necessarily be a matter of hygiene (Srinivas 1952). In caste-based connotations of purity and pollution, physical purity may not be ritual purity and vice versa (Khare 1962).

Residents of the slums of Angul and Dhenkanal practise norms of purity and pollution, although these are somewhat relaxed due to spatial constraints and the adoption of modern technologies and modern notions of sanitation. Even though the caste system renders them impure, the “untouchable” castes observe norms of purity and pollution in their sanitation practices. For instance, they change their clothes when they go out for defecation and they do not perform puja until they have bathed. They also try to keep the inner spaces of their houses pure. This indicates that the lower castes practise the performative aspects of caste to maintain ritual cleanliness even as the barrier of ritual purity and impurity between the castes persists (Srinivas 1962).

Non-negotiable Behavioural Aspects

The connotations of physical dirt and ritual dirt influence sanitation behaviours in urban spaces with varying degrees of compromise and adaptation. However, even the urban environment cannot make people compromise on what can be called the “non-negotiable” aspects of culture. For example, when a toilet is constructed within the house and it coexists with the pure spaces, the place for defecation is barricaded from the living inner space of the house. While the middle class can separate some rooms, such as puja *ghar* (place of worship), kitchen, and living space from the toilet, the poor do not have sufficient space to construct separate, barricaded spaces for what is considered pure. Hence, people in slums prefer to construct toilets outside the main living space, where they worship, cook, and eat. A wealthier household may have toilets within the house and septic tanks that—unlike the pit toilets of the poor—keep the dirt away, thus maintaining the physical and ritual cleanliness of the inner space. However, for the poor, a toilet inside or close to the house means that the inner space becomes physically and ritually impure. Regardless of their location and technology, toilets carry the connotation of ritual impurity. Hence, toilet behaviours remain the same in middle-class as well as poor households. All castes, whether rich or poor, employ manual scavengers from the untouchable castes to clean their septic tanks and pits.

In the absence of a separate puja *ghar*, slum dwellers in both cities house their deities on a shelf in a bedroom, which is sometimes the only room they have, and is used for multiple purposes. The wall becomes sacred, cohabiting with the profane of the bedroom. In some houses, puja shelves are placed in the kitchen.

A household kitchen in Odisha is not merely a space for cooking; it is also a place for worshipping ancestors called

Ishan. The ancestors are placed in the kitchen only when it is separate from the rest of the house. In the absence of adequate physical space, people may either leave *Ishan* in their village homes—if they still have relatives in the village—or abandon worship altogether. *Ishan* is considered a sacred practice; the sanctity of the spirits that shower well-being on the family cannot be compromised by locating them in a space that is impure. Therefore, while middle-class homes have them in the kitchen, many slum residents living in congested houses discontinue the practice.

Traditionally, women are considered the custodians of the purity of the inner, private space of the house. In slums, women continue to perform that role. They keep the space physically clean by removing dirt and household garbage. They also ensure that the inner space is not polluted by outside dirt, like that carried by shoes. Sacred objects in the inner space—deities and food—are touched only after women bathe in morning and change into fresh clothes. Even though men may perform puja, the daily ritual of purification is still assigned to women. Women change into separate clothes during defecation, regardless of whether they practise *od* or use a toilet. Women refrain from performing puja when their bodies are considered impure, such as during menstruation and after delivery. The inner space is not only the space inside the house; it includes the outer space attached to the house. Every Hindu household worships the tulsi plant grown outside.

Tribal communities residing in the slums of Angul and Dhenkanal also practise Hindu norms of purity and pollution to varying degrees. Anthropologists classify tribes according to their degree of assimilation into Hindu caste society and peasantry (Elwin 1944; Roy-Burman 1983; Vidyarthi and Rai 1977). However, it is beyond the scope of this study to measure the extent to which the tribal communities in the two cities have been assimilated into Hindu caste society. There is no caste system among the Kandha, Sabar, and Juang tribes. Therefore, they do not observe caste-based rituals of purity and pollution. However, these tribes have their own rituals of purity and pollution, some of which resemble the caste system. These may be the result of cultural assimilation due to living in close proximity to Hindus. For instance, the tribal people in Angul and Dhenkanal consider Hadi, Ghasi, and Mehtar—the sweeper castes—untouchable. They also follow casteist norms of social interaction, such as avoiding sharing food and entering into marriages with the low castes. The dirty/unclean work the sweeper castes do is cited as the reason for treating them as untouchable.

What is considered sacred or pure is largely governed by tribal cultural systems of totemism and animism. The sacred world is comprised of natural objects such as trees and animals. Usually, the totem constitutes the symbol of the clan to which a sub-group of a tribe belongs. It is a sacred object that the tribal people worship and strive to protect. Like Hindus, they too worship the tulsi plant, but have their own deities that are mostly goddesses. In addition, they worship some Hindu gods and goddesses, such as Lakshmi, Durga, Ganesh, and Jagannath.

A tribal household, much like a Hindu household, keeps its deities indoors. Tribal people worship *Ishan* the same way as

Hindus in Odisha. The *Ishan* are kept in the kitchen, making it a sacred space. The inner space of a household is considered pure because the sacred—deities and *Ishan*—reside in the house. Hence, placing a toilet inside the house is considered a violation of the space's purity unless it is barricaded. If the living space is small and open, people refrain from constructing a toilet inside the house. This explains why people do not use the toilets constructed as part of the *IHSDP* dwelling units in Dhenkanal.

Tribal women, just like Hindu women, are the custodians of the inner space, and are responsible for maintaining its physical and ritual purity. However, unlike Hindu women, tribal women do not strictly follow the daily ritual of performing *puja* in the house, although they also follow the purification ritual of bathing before entering the kitchen and changing their clothes for defecation. They follow the purity/pollution rituals related to birth and death.

Open Defecation

The residents of the slums in the two cities practise *OD* at a variety of sites, such as government-owned, private, and temple land. In Angul, *OD* sites include the bank of a canal, a privately owned wasteland, the field of a government institute, and another piece of disused private land. Forests, canal banks, ponds, agricultural fields, roadsides around highways, and temple land⁵ are used as *OD* sites in Dhenkanal.

These sites are governed by an informal understanding between the owner(s) of the land—who may be government bodies, private owners, or temple trusts—and those using it for *OD*. While they are occasionally threatened and abused by non-slum-dwellers and the spaces barricaded, slum-dwellers continue to use these sites until they cease to exist. For instance, in Angul, *OD* could no longer be practised on a private land due to the construction of new houses, or on the property of a college where a women's hostel has been constructed. Not every available open space is used for *OD*; for example, roadsides are used, but parks are not. There is, thus, a tacit understanding about spaces that can be used for *OD*. Spaces that will definitely invoke public rage, or are inaccessible because they are marked for a specific use, such as parks, are not used. *OD* spaces are thus governed by an understanding about what is permissible and what is not. Civic spaces, regulated by the government, are not violated.

In order to minimise shame and avoid the gaze of the public, several people use *OD* sites early in the morning or late in the evening. However, certain spaces, particularly if they are not totally open, such as the lower edge of a canal, are used even during the day. In specific situations, such as illness, people are forced to practise *OD* even at times that they would otherwise not do so.

OD spaces are often segregated by gender. This segregation takes place informally, and is governed by norms of shame, avoidance, and kinship on the one hand, and the intention to restrain men from appropriating space on the other. The absence of such segregation has the potential to restrict women's access to *OD* sites and consequently cause social conflicts.

However, segregation does not imply that these spaces are physically safe for women. The social understanding of these spaces is violated by the risk of physical abuse and violence that women sometimes face.

OD is practised not only by those who do not have toilets. Those who have toilets use them selectively: at night, during illness, and in the rainy season; in addition, old people and women, particularly pregnant women, old women, and adolescent girls often use toilets.

There are many reasons why those who have toilets do not use them: the fear that the pit will get filled too soon; the high cost associated with cleaning the pit; the feeling that the dirt, though underground, is too close to living, cooking, and worship spaces in small dwellings; cultural notions of purity and pollution; and social norms of shame and avoidance that regulate defecation in the presence of the elderly, males (in the case of women), and guests. Water is also a significant constraint in the use of toilets at home, since water supply in slums is erratic and inadequate.

OD is inconvenient for all, but it is specifically challenging for women. They are forced to practise it only during certain times of day when it is dark, such as early mornings or late evenings. Although there is no formal prohibition of *OD* in the daytime, women feel ashamed because of the pervading notion that open spaces are for men, and public gaze is to be avoided. The masculine connotations of open spaces on the one hand, and the sexualisation and shame of the female body on the other, regulate *OD* times for women. While *OD* at night is risky for all women due to potential physical violence, it is especially so for pregnant, ill, and elderly women. Menstruating women face additional hygiene risks, as the water they carry may be inadequate, or because they may have to wash in public ponds and canals.

In the absence of toilets or due to their selective use, *OD* is a common practice despite its inconvenience and physical and health risks, particularly for women at night. For example, the open field that is used by the residents of one slum, Hadi Sahi in Angul, is inundated with wastewater from a hospital. Although people are aware of the risks, they continue the practice.

It is a common perception that *OD* per se is not a problem. Human excreta does not pollute fields; it turns into fertiliser through the natural processes of the sun and soil. Migrants from villages are accustomed to *OD*. What they find difficult is the distance of *OD* sites from their homes, lack of privacy, and risks. While men do not feel a strong need for toilets at home, particularly for themselves, women almost unanimously express the benefits of household toilets.

Infrastructure

The majority of slum households use pit and improved pit toilets. Many of these toilets are poorly designed and lack adequate technology. Some households have toilets that are connected to drains and canals, where they discharge their effluents. Not all toilets used for defecation have a superstructure. Some are without the superstructure altogether, while others have half-erected ones covered with clothes, rags, and plastic bags.

Residents in slums located on canal banks have invested their own resources in constructing toilets. Canal banks have

busy roads parallel to them, which expose people practising OD to public view; hence, people have no choice but to use toilets. In other slums where access to OD sites previously used is getting difficult, people have either constructed or are contemplating construction of toilets. Even though these slums are unauthorised and its residents do not have rights to the land—making them vulnerable to eviction—they have still invested in toilet construction. In other slums where prior OD sites are becoming increasingly inaccessible, people are contemplating the construction of toilets.

Slum dwellers prefer to spend their money on houses rather than on toilets because they see houses as necessary for safety and shelter, but toilets as replaceable with alternatives. The construction of a toilet at home is determined by many factors, such as financial resources; the availability of physical space; the needs of the old, the sick, and the women in the family; and considerations of purity and pollution that become particularly constraining in small houses. Those with toilets invest their own money in its construction. The toilets are often designed and built by construction workers and masons from within the slums at affordable costs.

As OD sites close or become difficult to access, the pressure increases to construct toilets. However, having a toilet in the house does not mean that the household members' defecation practice is hygienic, as most people use unsanitary toilets. These, along with spatial constraints, blur the lines between ritual and physical dirt for the urban poor. The poor, therefore, prefer to construct toilets outside the living space. When a toilet is located inside a very small house, people are more likely to refrain from using it.

The design of the IHSDP houses illustrates why people do not use toilets inside the house. The IHSDP has been implemented in the slums in Dhenkanal since 2008. The scheme is comprehensive and provides each selected household a dwelling unit.

A dwelling unit comprises a room, kitchen, bathroom, toilet, and veranda. The size of a dwelling unit is 25 sq m.

The toilets in the IHSDP houses are not used by the residents. The toilets are used mostly as storage areas to keep kitchen utensils, wood, etc. In some houses, the bathroom adjacent to the toilet is used as the puja ghar. In most houses, the small open space in front of the toilet and bathroom is used for cooking. It is obvious that the toilets are not in use. Toilets being inside the house, particularly when the house is small, is not considered hygienic and culturally appropriate. As one IHSDP house-owner in Alasua Sahi put it, "Who would use a toilet that is right in front of the kitchen? We cook here, we eat here, and we worship here. How can we ever use this toilet?" Some people mentioned that they had asked for the toilet to be constructed outside, but it could not be done. The dwelling unit structure was pre-determined, and could not be changed.

Governance of Sanitation

The Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM-U), launched in 2014, strives to make urban India open defecation-free by 2019. It aims to provide sanitary toilets to all urban households. The new scheme for toilet construction promoted under SBM-U provides financial assistance to those who lack toilets or have unsanitary toilets. Unlike in rural areas, the urban scheme does not cover the total cost of constructing an individual household latrine (IHHL); it provides partial funding as an "incentive" for constructing an individual toilet. The scheme promotes septic tanks and soak pit technology for sanitary toilets.

The Odisha state policy follows the national policy in emphasising behavioural change as a prerequisite for toilet use among the urban poor. Behavioural change is conceptualised as the shift required in practices of purity and pollution that deter Hindus from using toilets. This notion of behavioural change does not take into account beliefs regarding purity and pollution,

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norms that people are ready to adapt and compromise, the constraints of physical space, costs of technology, and the availability of resources, which influence toilet infrastructure for the poor.

There is negligible community participation in government schemes in Angul and Dhenkanal. Municipalities have given a short shrift to participatory processes, thus adopting a top-down approach despite schemes' provisions for participation. Participation has thus remained confined to an initial meeting held by the municipal officials at the wards to inform residents about the schemes.

Women play a significant role in both private and public sanitation. Policies recognise women as a vulnerable group; they provide additional financial incentives to women and households headed by widows. However, there is seldom any consultation with women about their needs and choices.

Conclusions

The sanitation perceptions, practices, and behaviours of the poor in Angul and Dhenkanal are characterised by both tradition and modernity. The practice of open defecation coexists with toilets based on modern technology. The same people engage in both practices without recognising the anomalies. They easily adapt to current technology without forsaking rituals and practices based on tradition, such as changing clothes after defecation. The space between tradition and modernity is not fraught with contradiction, but becomes a way of life. Different segments of the population—upper caste, lower caste, and tribal people—find their own in-between spaces.

In these “in-between” spaces, constituted by tradition and modernity, and the influence of sociocultural factors such as caste and purity/pollution on the sanitation behaviours of the poor, can be classified into three types: continuity, adaptation, and retention of certain practices as non-negotiables.

Culture does not operate alone, but interacts with a host of other factors: the availability of physical space, financial

resources, and access to infrastructure and technology. Hence, we find that among households with toilets, their use is determined by existing technology and the availability of physical space and water. The more affluent sections have more physical space, modern technology with soak pits and septic tanks, and water. The poor use toilets selectively for the same reasons: a lack of physical space, proximity of the toilets to the living space, lack of access to better technology, and non-availability of water to keep the toilets clean. The poor, therefore, prefer to build toilets outside the main living space, as their houses are too small to barricade the pure, inner spaces of worship and cooking from the impure space of the toilet. For this reason, the owners of IHSDP houses do not use their toilets. The preferences of the poor cannot be dismissed as mere cultural preferences. In the absence of adequate physical space and lack of access to hygiene technology, the difference between physical dirt and ritual dirt—in this case, human excreta—is blurred. Similarly, the practice of OD in the urban space cannot be interpreted merely as a cultural choice or preference over the use of a toilet. Contradictory to the popular myth that people prefer OD or do not want to use toilets, there is a high demand for toilets under SBM-U. Financial constraints often force the poor to practise OD.

Due to the SBM-U's emphasis on the physical target of a specific number of toilets that need to be constructed within a specified time period, any localised, complex, or nuanced understanding of culture escapes the current policies. There is no scope in the policies to accommodate how culture manifests in the local context. A lack of community consultation and participation further limits information about the specific needs of people. The failure to adapt to local requirements also restricts implementers from customising policies. It is not that the local implementers themselves understand the complexities of culture.⁶ However, if policies expand their scope to include understanding culture, it is likely that the governance of sanitation at the local level will follow.

NOTES

- 1 In poorer parts of rural sub-Saharan Africa and Bangladesh, only about 35% and 5% of households, respectively, defecate in the open.
- 2 Authorised slums are formally recognised as slums. Since unauthorised slums are not formally recognised, the residents have no record of their rights to the place where the slum is located.
- 3 IHSDP is a sub-component of the Jawaharlal Nehru Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM), which is an urban housing programme.
- 4 The word “untouchable” is used in this text only to indicate how the caste system renders certain castes and people untouchable, and does not connote that they are actually untouchable.
- 5 The temple land belongs to the temple trust.
- 6 For example, municipal officials do not see it as an anomaly that all sweepers belong to a low caste; they believe that people of this caste are experts in sweeping and best suited to the job.

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