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A SILENT REVOLUTION FOR HEALTHY LIVING IN THE SLUMS OF TIRUCHI

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Abstract

Squalor, Lack of Protected water, Clogged drains, Open Defecation, ill-lit and ill-ventilated huts have been making the Quality of Life of slum dwellers very poor. The lack of basic amenities and job opportunities in rural areas lead to an exodus of the rural folk to towns where slums mushroom without Protected water, drainage or toilet facilities. Further, the apathy and inability of the authorities due to humanitarian and political considerations, worsen the environment in the slums, which are not at all conducive for to healthy living. The slum dwellers have been suffering many water borne and respiratory diseases and the worst sufferers have been the children in the slums.

At Long last in Tiruchi and other towns a silent revolution has started, thanks to the efforts of the highly committed NGOs, progressive bureaucrats and properly motivated residents of these very slums. The younger generation of the population in these slums have realised that the unhygienic and unhealthy environment in which they live robbed them of their meager daily wages and further forced them to spend between Rs.10 & Rs.20 for medical expenses everyday. Due to the constant and persistent campaign by NGO's the slum dwellers are aware that open defecation and absence of protected water are the greatest enemies to a healthy life. In Tiruchi alone, over 25,000 slum dwellers are prepared to pay 50 Paise every time they use the toilet everyday. The Self Help Groups of women who are fully in charge of the maintenance of the toilets have also begun to understand the need for Solid Waste Management Programmes to improve the environment in the slums. There is an urgent need to make this beginning a mass movement for upgrading the quality of life in our slums.

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Tiruchi city, located in the central region of Tamil Nadu state, India, and situated on the banks of the river Cauvery, has a hoary tradition of being the capital of the early Chola Kings dating back almost 2,000 years. Being so ancient, it is no wonder that the 20th century modern city is an ideal place for the existence and growth of slums, since the original habitations and center of activity were all designed in the distant past and these cannot be easily adjusted or altered to suit the modern styles of living.

Today Tiruchi is a corporation with a population of 8.5 lakhs and extending over 147 Sq Kms. There are hundreds of apartments, commercial complexes, central and state government offices in the city. There are also patches of lands where paddy, sugarcane & banana are cultivated. There are 280 approved and 400 unapproved big and small slums.

The quality of life in these slums – as in many other slums in other parts of the country is extremely pathetic. Squalor, lack of protected water, clogged drains, the practice of open defecation by both adults and children, badly lit and ill-ventilated dwellings make living very poor.

Tiruchi attracts hundreds of landless farm labourers, educated youth, construction workers etc. in search of a living and those of whom who get a part time job at meager salaries tend to seek temporary places of shelter.

The city abounds in vast stretches of open land belonging to Government. or local bodies, and temples which are not properly maintained by their owners. Over 20Kms of broad gauge railway lines pass through the city and the ten-meter stretch of land on either side of the track which legally belongs to the Railways is a prime location where the slums have grown over the past century.

The four major irrigation canals stretching over 25Kms of the river cauvery in the heart of Tiruchi do not have any ayacut due to urbanization during the past seven decades. Also the Flood Prone limit of ten metres of land as well as the canals themselves are bereft of water except during periods of floods. Due to the lack of clarity over their maintenance between the Public Works department and the Corporation slums have sprung up. Every three or four years the floods cause further dislocation and misery to the thousands of slum dwellers in the city living by the canal banks.

Tiruchi is also a city of temples, sporting some of the ancient ones like the Sri Ranganathaswami temple, the Rockfort temple, the Sri Jambunathaswamy temple etc. These temples own vast stretches of land. Since these temples do not have any strong administrators being part of the Government department, the vacant lands of the temples have been heavily encroached upon and slums have sprung up. Further vast stretches of land in the Railway Colony, Golden Rock Colony and military grounds have also been encroached upon in a slow and steady manner. This is partly due to the political and humanitarian considerations of the authorities. It has been estimated that roughly 20 percent of the population are living in the slums on encroached Railway, Government, Temple, corporation and P.W.D. disputed lands. Although that they are not the legal owners of the land where the dwellings are, neither the dwellers nor the agencies are prepared to demolish the slum dwellings and build better houses even though some of them are today economically sound to do so.

Synergy: The Basis for the Silent Revolution

It is heartening that in Tiruchi a silent revolution is taking place to improve the quality of life, and as in all new developments it is due to the synergizing of the forces of many agencies

involved in the process of development. The key players in this new initiative are a number of highly committed NGO's.

WATER AID, a London based voluntary agency interested in provision of protected water in rural areas - after a deep and scientific study of field trials - came to the conclusion that the health of the poorest of the poor could not be improved by just providing them with protected water using hand pumps or a combined water supply. Both urban and rural people suffered from water-borne diseases like dysentery and diarrhoea, as the drinking water or source of the drinking water was often contaminated by germs due to the extensive traditional practice of open-defecation. The Water Aid helped three NGOs – SEVAI, GRAMALAYA and SCOPE of Tiruchi to put up low cost toilets in individual houses in rural areas and the response from the public with the women taking the lead was overwhelming. The low cost latrines put up at a cost ranging from Rs.700 to Rs.1250 became popular instantly. The health status of the people has improved and the repayment of the small loan portion of the total cost was a simply epoch-making 100 percent. The word spread fast and hundreds of people in dozens of villages started approaching the NGOs for further assistance.

The Police Adopts Slums

In 1999, another momentous movement started in Tiruchi when the then Tiruchi Police Commissioner launched a community policing programme by adopting 12 slums in the city where the crime rate was very high. The police found out that the most unhealthy and pathetic environment in the slums not only was a breeding ground for diseases but frustration in the minds of the slum dwellers made them indulge in many anti-social activities.

With the help of the Tiruchi District, EXNORA -a voluntary agency interested in improving the Tiruchi Environment, the Tiruchi Corporation was roped in to clean up the clogged drains, remove garbage, repair local hand pumps, water supply mains & repair streetlights. Soon the corporation and EXNORA brought the District Administration as well into the development works. Everyone found that open defecation was the main problem to be tackled to improve the health status of the slum dwellers and improve the entire environment. Thanks to this outreach programme – community policing, the Tiruchi Police commissioner was awarded two international prizes, one by the world police officials association and the other by the Commonwealth countries.

The NGOs with their rich experience in forming Self Help Groups (SHG) for women rose to the occasion. A study conducted by WATER AID revealed that on an average the slum dwellers – mostly daily wage earners were susceptible to water borne diseases for five days a month which not only forced them to stay at home depriving them of their daily wage but also spend at least Rs.25 a day on Medical treatment from doctors. Self Help groups of women were formed in these areas and their sustained sanitation, health and hygiene campaign opened the eyes of the slum dwellers. With the help of the NGO's , as many as 25 public toilets (though in a filthy condition these were used by the public for want of a better alternative) were repaired with the active support of the Tiruchi Corporation.

Fully aware of the dangers of open defecation, women made a beeline to these toilets and started patronizing them paying 50 Paise per visit. The small payment they made was nothing compared to the losses they incurred by losing wages and medical expenses. A study conducted recently revealed a very high reduction in diarrhoea among children from 73% to 10% and reduction in medical expenditure by 88% per family.

The Tiruchi corporation which found it extremely difficult to maintain the public toilets to be good enough for patronage by the general public was now surprised at the cleanliness being maintained by the SHGs. The corporation took a policy decision to hand over the maintenance of all public toilets to the SHGs. The NGOs trained the residents of the area around each toilet to form SHGs among themselves and how to run the toilets efficiently in a hygienic manner. A few of the most successful SHGs have several hundreds of people using the toilet daily and have bank balances crossing Rs. One Lakh. A few of them had put up community center buildings crossing Rs. One/two lakhs for common purposes and most of them are advancing loans to other members for economic activity and empowerment.

Child Friendly Toilets

Gramalaya, one of the NGOs in Tiruchi which found open defecation by children in open drains returning without washing their hands to their homes has come up with child friendly toilets. The intensive campaign using the latest information, education and communication tools, door to door visits, educating the parents and special health education programmes in all schools has resulted in student toilets. Child Friendly toilets do not have roofs or doors, but have privacy, water supply, and beautiful caricatures of pets and animals on the walls. All centers have been provided with washbasins and soap. Personal hygiene tips like keeping one's hands and feet clean, brushing of teeth, combing of hair etc. are also taught to the children. It may be surprising but it is true. Everyday about 20,000 slum dwellers in many parts of the city are visiting the community toilets and everyone is paying for this facility. Most of the toilets are kept open for 16 hours and a few round the clock.



WATER AID - GRAMALAYA Children Friendly Toilet

Challenges

The Major challenge faced in the above success story is that only about 20 percent of the males use the toilets. Elderly people and quite a few middle aged men have a mental block to using the toilets and admit that they are too used to the habit of open defecation and find it extremely difficult to use the community toilets.

Another difficulty has been sustaining the interest of the junior level officers in their role in maintaining the slum cleanliness. Lack of funds for cleaning the open drains is another major initiative needed to make the slum environment clean and healthy.

The Tiruchi District EXNORA has recently, with the help of BORDA - a German partner, launched a new Decentralized waste water treatment plan for treating the reuse and recycling of waste water coming from the community toilet in East Devadhanam in Tiruchi city. And to improve the general health and status it has also introduced Integrated Solid waste management starting from source segregation at slum dwellings to composting in the toilet campus.

The Tiruchi experience shows that if our District Administration, Corporation officials, NGO's and others all join hands to approach and work with the slum dwellers, though illiterate, - instead of working for them - the response from them in improving their environment would indeed be spontaneous and overwhelming.

The next stage will be for the slum development board, District Administration and corporation to construct vertical tenements for the slum dwellers. Shifting the slum dwellers to far off places would not be a good proposition since their way of life, avenues of employment etc. are too intricately intertwined with the slum area where they have been living for ages.

Healthy toilet Habits : No Longer Nobody's Business, Everybody's business

At Present in Tiruchi City 100 toilets are being maintained by the SHG's. The leading NGOs have decided to extend the similar management practices to 80 existing public toilets. Sixty new toilets are proposed to be constructed under a Master plan. A Federation of the SHGs of the NGOs will be formed, which will ultimately take up not only the maintenance of all the toilets, but also many projects under different heads for the overall economic and social empowerment of the slum dwellers for a healthy life.

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