

In the Load of shit, we sail or sink together

The video under discussion is a tale of two households' namely "clean" and "careless" facilities. Their titles are well earned. One is an epitome of cleanliness, health and happiness while the other is a sad story of doom and gloom. The two families match each other in age, number of the dependents, father's occupation, household income, neighborhood, accommodation arrangements and living in close proximity of animals. However, they are poles apart in their hygienic practices and behaviors.

The tidiness of the clean family's house, especially the kitchen, is exemplary. The cooking methods, food storage and refuse disposal practices bespeak volumes about their hygienic mindset. They enjoy good health as their norms are hand washing before cooking and after visiting latrine, regular bathing and frequent changing into clean clothes. The name of the careless family is self-explanatory. Their dilapidated house has no toilet; hence open defecation is resorted to. The customary cooking on the floor constantly exposes food to dust and with the animals let loose in the yard, sickness in the family is not surprising. The father-son duo is unwell. In the absence of hygienic practices, the illness shows no signs of decline.

Although the video ends here, but the story continues (*aka picture abhi baqi hai mere dost*).....

Sanitation is a collective public good as it contributes towards health, socioeconomic development and clean environment. Yet according to UN, of the world's 7 billion people, 6 billion have mobile phones yet only 4.5 billion have access to a toilet. They resort to defecating publicly by shamelessly relieving themselves in gutters, behind bushes, agricultural fields, and open water bodies, often in full sight of friends and families. In the rainy season, the fecal matter seeps into drinking water sources, increasing the vulnerabilities to conditions like diarrhea, dysentery, hepatitis A, typhoid, cholera, intestinal worms, anemia and malnutrition. Ironically, this associated morbidity and mortality is preventable. Unhygienic practices set into motion a vicious cycle of poverty, ignorance and disease.

Toilets symbolize dignity, health, privacy and women empowerment. Non-existent or unclean latrines, contribute towards children missing school. Girls drop-out and the country's literacy declines. Female workers find it hard to work where gender segregated toilets are not available. The predicament of young girls and pregnant women, due to lewd comments and danger of sexual assault is unparalleled. The misery of sick and elderly due to long distances and undue waiting until dark is theirs alone. Lack of access to sanitation has financial implications too. The losses accrued at individual, societal, national and international levels are sizeable, yet unnecessary.

Open defecation is a ghastly a practice and the many a reason are responsible for its continuation. Poverty, social custom, ignorance, lack of technical

expertise, low political interest and poor sustainability comes to fore? However, research and reflection reveal that the *raison d'être* is mindset and not money as it is claimed that the return on investment for every 1 \$ spent each on infrastructure, health, education and sanitation is \$3, \$5, \$7 and \$9 respectively.

The Millennium Development Goals accorded high priority to sanitation. But despite halving the global target, the endpoint stayed largely missed. It goes without saying that the upcoming Sustainable Development Goals must continue giving sanitation its rightful share. Workers must feel ok (if not glamorous) to work on 'Shit' or 'Waste'.

Pakistan is among the countries most off track to attain sanitation related MDGs. In the wake of our high ranking in unhygienic practices, it's not a trick question. The religious injunction "cleanliness is next to godliness" is given much lip service to but ironically does not translate in everyday life.

There is no time for debate or waiting for magic wands or band aids. We must address this silent emergency through capacity building and handholding support. We need to kindle the collective conscious of the people by educating them and allaying their reservations on 100 construction quality, building latrines adjacent to or within houses, using and maintaining hygiene in toilets, water requirements to rest.

It is often said that the person who does not construct a toilet is a fool, because he is eating his own shit, but the person, who has constructed a toilet, while others in his village have not, is a bigger fool, because he is eating theirs. Around 90 % of sewage in the developing world is discharged untreated into streams and rivers. If individual latrine is the responsibility of citizens then linking them to a sewage system comes in the ambit of the state because the health hazards of water and sewage pipelines lying side by side are hard to ignore.

It would be far better if policy makers and practitioners advocate most cost effective interventions like hand washing and using latrines to achieve the lofty ideal of health for all. Behavioral change is a difficult and dynamic issue to tackle. But we must address it frontally because in this load of shit we sailor sink together.

All actors and factors must act in unison to keep people healthy and productive, all must follow religious injunctions, adopt hygienic practices, teach children the same. Efforts must be made to reintroduce the long forgotten subject of civics in the curriculum. At macro and micro levels, waste management must be effective and efficient.

Shit is unsightly and nauseous. We must make an *effort* to go beyond 100 % latrine coverage and rectify the most palpable causes of open defecation because it is obviously some "serious shit". Providing access to basic sanitation to all is not merely a public health challenge of our time, it's our moral obligation too. Achieving decent standards of hygiene for everybody in the world is possible if UNICEF slogan "Take poo to the loo" is upheld at all times.