The success of an initiative depends not just in executing it the first time. It is dependent on the follow-up and monitoring and on consistent utilisation. And such success is even further enhanced when a community goes beyond the initial idea and explores other benefits and systems. Rudravaram is a Gram Panchayat (GP) that is achieving exactly this. The Gram Panchayat is now heading beyond Open Defecation Free status (ODF) to address other issues such as solid and liquid waste management, ensuring cement roads, and underground drainage and sanitation facilities for all households in the GP.

A GP with a total of 520 households with a population of 1830, Rudravaram had 72 Individual Household Latrines (IHHL) constructed. With this every household has access to a toilet and the GP has been declared as Open Defecation Free village in 2015.

In the beginning, awareness meetings were conducted on Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) by the Gram Panchayat involving community, SHGs, ASHA workers and Anganwadis. The Mandal officials also conducted meetings with village level functionaries and Elected representatives on construction of toilets under Swachh Bharat Mission. As a follow-up of the meetings, the Panchayat had collected the details of toilets constructed and the requirement. Most of the households in the GP already had access to the IHHLs which were constructed on their own or through previous Government schemes in the GP. About 72 households did not have access to toilets. Special meetings were organised to motivate these households about sanitation and the need for having IHHL.
The question of whether they will get the payments once they spend was what stopped most people. Though initially only four to six families who were motivated by the IEC activities started construction in their houses, others followed suit once these families started getting payments. Consistent usage of toilets was another issue. While male members of the community did not think of it as necessary to use IHHLs as they related the same to privacy of women, the GP had to take steps to keep a watch on those resorting to open defecation.

In a nutshell, Rudravaram had issues that were as unexpected as they were interesting. While the first phase resulted in less than 10 toilets, with sustained efforts by the GP team and all the community members, total coverage could be achieved. As is the case with most places, usage was inadequate and it even threw up some interesting reasons. In one incident, it was noted that one of the households has not been using IHHL constructed one month ago. Upon enquiry, the lady in the house expressed that the family has not yet received any payment from SBM and was apprehensive about receiving payment if the IHHL looks old and used. No doubt, the GP was taken aback and resolved to have further awareness sessions.

An elderly woman gave an interesting insight into perceptions and habits. She confessed that she was not very open to using the toilet as she feels that toilets, unlike in open defecation, get dirty easily and stink. “I am saying this openly but most people would not tell you this is the reason they prefer the outdoors,” she said. This admission by the elderly villager points to the importance of maintaining IHHLs.

And then there was this issue of migrant labour coming into the village and setting up temporary tents. The village has no arrangements for their sanitation needs. The Sarpanch had temporarily given the responsibility of the migrants to the employer who brings them in to the village. The employer is expected to stop these workers from defecating in open in the GP premises. However the Sarpanch along with the GP team are planning to come up with a better solution to cater to the sanitation needs of the migrants in the village thereby ensuring end of open defecation.

There was also an issue of a family with a pregnant woman which believed that it was inauspicious for the house to have construction activity until the baby was delivered. As an exception, these things, born out of individual cultural beliefs and traditions may not deter the efforts to achieve total sanitation. They may be addressed in due manner.

What sets Rudravaram apart from other villages is its efforts to set up waste disposal and drainage systems which are crucial elements to sanitation.