Winning an Open Defecation Free (ODF) badge may be easy. But how to sustain it? Ask the Panchayat team and the community at Bollavaram in Muppala Mandal of Guntur district. Post-achievement, the Gram Panchayat (GP) team is now concentrating on motivating the community to end open defecation completely. The team has devised a mechanism where everyone watches over the others. If any community member finds someone defecating in the open, he or she will have to report it to the Sarpanch who will then either counsel them or levy some small amount as fine whichever is felt necessary. The Panchayat is also trying to positively motivate the population by rewarding individuals who report instance of open defecation.

The total number of households of the Bollavaram Panchayat is 353 with a total population of 1433. Bollavaram has been declared as ODF panchayat in the year 2015.

At the onset of Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM), Mandal officials discussed regarding the importance of sanitation with the Sarpanch and Panchayat Secretaries and about the immediate need to motivate the community members to attain complete sanitation. The GP team (Sarpanch, Panchayat Secretary (PS), ASHA workers, Anganwadi workers) took up the initiative of visiting all households and explaining the importance and need for sanitation. In this process, the first step was obviously construction of toilets and though many households in the village had by then already an idea of constructing toilets, they could not do it as they had financial constraints. Hence, after the GP team detailed out the process of assistance, the initial construction took place.

Even then, a few households did not show interest in getting toilets constructed. The team realized that there was need for further motivation, to convince them that sanitation is critically linked to health, dignity of women, and overall well-being of the community.
In initial stages, challenges were very high when compared to successes. But the Sarpanch and GP team worked to resolve all ground-level problems. To bring the coverage of toilets to 100% in GP the Sarpanch took good initiatives with support from Mandal level officials who supported by making sure bulk construction takes place and money is saved by households. Material for bulk construction was procured from local suppliers. Mandal level officials contacted local suppliers and availed discounts for bulk procurement of material.

In a few cases where motivation and IEC activities did not yield the expected results, the Sarpanch had given a notice to the households to cut off the benefits one receives from govt. (such as pensions, food rations etc…) unless the toilets are constructed.

**Constraints faced and resolved**

The challenges faced by the community include monetary and spatial constraints for the construction of a toilet. Households did not come forward to construct Individual Household Latrines (IHHLs) as they were apprehensive of receiving SBM funds post construction. Another issue faced was regarding the space in the cases where the households wanted to reconstruct the houses. GP team spoke to these households individually and explained that the households have to construct their IHHLs when the scheme lasts. The GP team also participated in deciding where the IHHL should be constructed so that it does not have to be demolished or re-done while re-constructing their house.

For the houses where investing the initial money was a problem, the Sarpanch pooled in some money and also got some discount on the raw materials to ensure that the burden on the families is reduced. Some major constraints after the construction of the toilet included getting used to the toilet and the argument that the toilet is to be used only when there is no more open and available space for open defecation. To solve this challenge, the GP team is constantly motivating the households by explaining to them why ending open defecation is important for them individually and for the village as a whole.

But what really stands out in Bollavaram Gram Panchayat is the way a mother-in-law welcomed her daughter-in-law. Smt. Shamshun, a resident of Bollavaram, constructed a toilet for her new daughter-in-law, having utilised the subsidy given under Swachh Bharat scheme. “And now all our family members are using it,” she says proudly “I neither had a toilet at my mother’s home during childhood nor at my mother-in-law’s home after marriage. Open defecation has been a known and habitual practice until 8 months ago. Walking long distance to go to an open place for defecation is time consuming. Particularly, during the rainy season it becomes very difficult and one can’t find words to express the trouble. Whenever my relatives and family friends from towns make a visit to my house, they do not stay for more than 12 hours for the fear of having to defecate in the open. One close relative who lived in Dubai refused to visit my house when he visited India because we do not have a toilet to use”.

It was recently, when her son was getting married that Shamshun decided to get a toilet constructed so that her daughter-in-law need not suffer the way she did.

When she heard from her neighbours about the Swachh Bharat scheme, and later, in a meeting conducted regarding the scheme by Sarpanch and officers at their village. After hearing the officials, she came forward to construct a toilet by utilising the subsidy given under the scheme. The village officials have given the construction details and also the disbursement of subsidy amount through instalments as per rules, she added. She was sanctioned an amount of Rs. 15,000 in three instalments. Besides subsidy, she said, an additional amount of Rs. 4000 was incurred to complete the toilet, which she had borne.

“I am now even more careful about my daughter-in-law’s hygiene and safety as she is pregnant. I do not want to risk the daughter-in-law’s health and am not willing to send the pregnant girl to her mother’s house as they do not have a toilet.” The fact that the sanitation needs of a woman are understood by another woman is highlighted here. “I am asking my daughter-in-law’s mother also to get a toilet at their place,” Shamshun says with a smile.

There is another interesting story from Bollavaram. A family which has been keen to construct a toilet could not do so as there was no money. But when Swachh Bharat Mission was announced, the lady of the house insisted on the construction. Though there was subsidy coming, the family did not have the initial amount.

They overcame this situation by mortgaging the jewellery of the wife. In her words, “Toilet is more important for women than gold.” Her will-power and persuasion led to the construction of a toilet. Today, they are yet to receive full money as the bills are still pending and they have been able to get Rs.7000/- only and they are continuing to pay the interest on the debt they have taken.

“The Panchayat said that we may lose out on REGA works in the coming summer if we do not construct a toilet; so we mortgaged my jewellery to construct it. We understand the importance of sanitation and we hope to be rid of our debt soon.”

**IEC material displayed in a school in Bollavaram**