

Our troubling toilets and theirs!

SUJATHA PADMANABHAN

With the world facing an acute shortage of water, we need to think up ways to preserve this precious resource.

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"Yuck! Gross!" I can hear you and imagine your faces screwed up in disgust as you read this piece on dry toilets. Most of us have been brought up to believe that human waste is disgusting and offensive and best flushed out of sight. But not if you are a Ladakhi, born and brought up in the cold desert regions of the Himalayan mountains. Here, human excreta is an important source of manure for the fields. The land here is not fertile, but the Ladakhis have made it so, over many generations, with their many ingenious methods.

For one, water is brought to the fields (sometimes over several kilometres) by a very elaborate network of *yura* or canals that traverse the barren landscape. Water from melting snow from the upper parts of the mountains reaches many villages only by the evening. This is stored in a 'zing', a man-made storage pond.

But water alone cannot do the trick. The soil has to yield and for that it has to be made fertile. This problem has largely been addressed by the traditional system of dry toilets. Almost all over Ladakh, the toilet is a hole in the floor of a room that is well above the ground. The human waste falls into a sealed room below, where it is allowed to decompose over time. The manure that forms is usually cleared out once a year and spread out on the fields.

The Ladakhi system of toilets is dry as no water is used. Instead, a shovel full of earth is thrown in after use. Occasionally ash is also used. This keeps the toilet odour-free. This system, which has been in use for many years, has provided the Ladakhi farmer manure for free. And has saved a resource that is very precious in that desert region: water.

Compare this to our urban sewage disposal systems. In all middle and upper class homes in our cities, about ten litres of water is used in every act of flushing. The drain pipes from houses carry a mix of black water (water mixed with human waste) and grey water (water from our kitchens, baths, etc). An underground network of sewers and drains carry this mix to sewage treatment plants. Here, the sewage is treated at great cost and the treated water is released into a river or sea or brought back into our taps for use.

The story does not end there. No city in India is able to treat all its sewage. As a result the untreated sewage pollutes our land and our water bodies. Take Delhi and the Yamuna, for example. An unimaginable quantity of untreated sewage flows into the river everyday: 1,800 million litres per day! Take a closer look at our lifestyles. Think of the water that we drink, that our families use for cooking and washing. Clearly, one of the biggest quantities of water that we use is what we flush down. And most often that water is fresh water. There are some interesting attempts to avoid using fresh water. A large hotel in Port Blair, for example, uses sea water in its flushes.

Which makes me think, the Ladakhi system of dry toilets does make for good earth, does it not?

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