

## Right to Pee'ace : A Step towards Gender Equity

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### Abstract

The Right To Pee (RTP) campaign advocates for free, clean and safe public urinals for women, initiated at Mumbai (MH) India, but has caught the imagination of many working in the field of gender sensitisation and equity. The campaign has brought into focus a fundamental neglected on not-thought-of issue into the centre of discussion. The United Nations in its 2014 report has brought out a “tragic irony” that there were more mobile phones per 100 people in India than toilets.

According to the 2011 census, there were 57,41,632 women living in Mumbai, and the city had just 381 public toilets. The statistics boils down to one public toilet for about 18,000 women, on the other hand in stark contrast there are 6568 toilets and 2849 urinals in Mumbai for the male population.

There is a urgent need to tackle availability of toilets nationwide where we find more than half India's adolescent girls, have no access to a private toilet. In schools, girls tend to miss for an average of six days a month because of the lack of safe toilets, leading to almost a quarter of them dropping out of education on reaching puberty. This has serious impacts on their potential as individuals and future contributors to India's human capital.

**Keywords:** Right to Pee, Women Movement, Gender Equity, Sanitation, SDG, Article 21

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### Introduction

The toilet is more than just a toilet, it's a life-saver, dignity-protector and opportunity-maker for equal integration. The reality needs to be understood by those privileged who have access to a hygienic toilet and proper sanitation, these people can be called luckier than the 4.2 billion people who are not that privileged, it like a difference between life and death. The concerted

effort in this direction is carried out by the women who are fighting for their basic right under the banner of 'Right to Pee' campaign.

Mumbai, which accolades itself for the city of dreams, the city that never sleeps, in the past few decades has seen a phenomenal rise in the number of women joining the workforce and accessing public places. It is heartening to see that public infrastructure has not kept the same pace, out of this blatant gender bias in urban planning, a new women's movement was thus born. It simply called itself the 'Right to Pee' campaign and it visions a fight for more public toilets and amenities for women with an effort to establish gender sensitive society, urban infrastructure and governance.

The united front of activists of Right to Pee is committed to both confronting the insensitive system and collaborating with government to bring about impactful change. The Evidence-based advocacy forms the core of the Right to Pee movement, it works by mapping and analysing public sanitation conditions, spreading awareness through traditional and new media and taking advocacy to the policy level, were by effectively lobbying the system for a change (1).

## **Brief Historical Overview**

Right to Pee (RTP) is the brainchild of the Committee of Resource Organisation (CORO) NGO in collaboration with other 33 non-profit organisations. In India, the topic of sanitation is a very personal and private affair, the Right to Pee movement has brought that private discussion in public sphere. The approach to campaign was emphasised on to make it a rights campaign and attract the public glare. The gendered private spaces are reflected in public domain, the work needs to be done in the public arena to collectively secure rights for gender friendly sanitation spaces and secure a matching budgetary provisions for such spaces be made.

As a concept of reclaiming the city for rights by one gender, it tries to focus attention on the woman selling goods at the traffic light or the woman selling vegetables in *mandai*, or those making their livelihood by stepping outside her house for 8 to 10 hours, the question to be posed is what are the provision of sanitation available? Here the urban miniscule have access to toilets at malls and hotels, but the majority of these women are left with no viable option out there, such limitation deters women from their active engagements in the urban workforce.

The campaign cuts across the class and caste divide, as the fact that women needed access to public toilets and urinals, this forms the core idea of the campaign which has been instrumental in making the public authorities such as BMC more gender sensitive and asking to provide for budgetary provisions for more toilets and urinals.

## **Right to Pee: Women's role in political participation and civil society organisation**

Women's role in social justice movement for political participation and access to public avenues of opportunities is gathering momentum with rise of gendered discourse. The "Right to Pee" movement demands creation of equal public toilet infrastructure/ restrooms for women for them to access the public domain. The premises lays on the fact that unavailability of toilet infrastructure inhibits the women's participation as they cannot stay out for more than 3-4hrs.

The other impinging issue of discrimination is the use of paid toilet for women and free for men. Women have to fight with the loo-keeper over the amount of rupees to be paid for the use of facilities. The condition of those paid toilets is also very bad, they are unclean, lacks water, secure door/windows and light during the night time. In fact many women in India due to lack of access to bathrooms hold their bladders for more than 11-12 hours, which has a very negative impact on their health. There are varying statistics on the number of women and girls who could have escaped rape if they had toilets in their homes.

For the women living in slums, the issue is far more challenging, as they need to wake up early to take care of bathroom burden either out in the open or in the public toilet in shadowy hours of the dawn. The residents have to spend more money than they earned to use the community toilets. The condition of community toilets is in very bad shape, were after midnight the women and children are forced to relieve themselves in the open, they faced harassment from men who are drunk and often they beat the children.

According to statistics, in Mumbai, there is only 1 out of every 3 public toilet seats for women. The system stakeholders responsible for urban sanitation are largely insensitive and even dismissive, in the face of these basic violations of equal rights to dignity, health, and access to public space (1). The campaign led to bringing out more explicitly the gendered dimensions. It led to prioritise women linked issues, especially their right to sanitation facilities in the debate of

municipality, as it is mostly a male dominated space, what justifies the apathy is that questions were raised by municipal members on women's need to access public toilets, thus reflecting the lack of sensibility to issue.

The Right to Pee (RTP) campaign works closely with the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) to discuss these issues and to formulate a policy response. The campaign had a highly positive impact on the BMC's attitude towards toilet construction with the municipal body allocating gender-specific funds over the past few years. They started out focusing on toilets and urinals for women in the public sphere. Today with paucity of spaces, there is a demand for multi-storied sanitation spaces with toilets/restrooms, bathrooms and feeding rooms for babies accessible to all women.

Role of toilets in struggle for social justice is very important. The struggle has two strands that are deeply interconnected, the first looks at the ways in which access to toilet is prerequisite for full public participation and citizenship. While the other looks at the distribution, quality, and structure of public toilets as symbols and representations of a larger system of social hierarchies. Almost all the social justice movements of the last century in United States have included struggles for adequate toilet facilities as an at least implicit part of their agendas in the civil rights movement, feminism, rights and rights for transgender. (2)

## **Right to Pee: Role and status in India**

"Too many women in too many countries speak the same language - of silence", Mrs. Clinton said in a speech, quoting the poem by Anasuya Sengupta, a senior at the Lady Sri Ram College. The poem has a special resonance here in the world's largest democracy, where the birth of a daughter is still an occasion for dread, where some brides are beaten or burned if their families resist in-laws demands for a higher dowry and where sexual harassment is common place (3).

More than half India's adolescent girls, have no access to a private toilet, girls tend to miss school for an average of six days a month because of the lack of safe toilets leading to almost a quarter of them dropping out of education on reaching puberty. The lack of toilet has sharply hampered their potential as individuals and as workforce. The United Nations 2014 report points out that it is a "tragic irony" that there are more mobile phones per 100 people in India than toilets. The report also pointed out on an economic estimate on importance of tackling issue of

sanitation, as it leads to a return of between \$3 and \$34 for every dollar spent on sanitation, through reduced poverty, health costs and effectively higher productivity.

In 1968, Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak, Founder of Sulabh International Social Service Organisation, invented two-pit pour-flush ecological compost toilet technology. Sulabh flush is based on a simple design that is eco-friendly and uses just around 1.5 litres of water to flush. In the context of developing countries where the sewer systems are almost non-existent, Sulabh toilets offer an innovative solution to the global sanitation crisis. When one pit is full, the incoming excreta is diverted to the second pit. In about two years, the excreta gets digested and becomes dry and pathogen-free, and safe for handling as manure. Digested sludge is odourless and is a good manure and soil-conditioner. This technological invention made a path-breaking difference in millions of household – particularly women- who did not have access to safe and hygienic toilet facilities. The technology offers safe disposal of human excreta on-site. It also meets all the seven criteria of safe on-site disposal of human waste prescribed by the World Health Organization (WHO) (4).

The Centre for Science and Environment in New Delhi, reports that less than 20 percent of sewage in India receives proper treatment and almost 80 percent of it ends up in rivers and lakes, affecting the ecosystem of river. The McKinsey Global Institute estimates a growth of India's urban population to 590 million by 2030, it puts onus on the urban planners and the urban bodies to ramp up its sanitation governance infrastructure to meet the requirements of sanitation facilities.

The Right to Pee movement works on various fronts which includes creating awareness on the usage of toilets, sensitising women about the gender biases, working with government and non-government agencies to overcome this issue. The members of movement evolved upon very innovative strategies to bring this basic issue to forefront which includes methods of media advocacy, inclusion of representative members in the decision making system processes, filing a Public Interest Litigation (PIL), working exhaustively on awareness campaigns, mapping of toilets with the help of its members and volunteers etc.

The media advocacy has led to leveraging mainstream and social media, the press conferences presented the evidence on poor sanitation to prominent news outlets. Social media platforms like

Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram helped to raise the profile of Right To Pee movement by it spread of message to broad audiences. The awareness campaigns through public protest, the 'mukkad' cultural performances, community wall-paintings, sending of Diwali greeting with smartly embedding the Right to Pee message, sending postcards for want of more urinals to government offices, petition signature campaign etc were the variety of strategies used to raise the profile of the issues.

The grassroots members and volunteers worked profoundly to conduct detailed surveys and analysis of public sanitation facilities across Mumbai. This collected data on toilets brought out ground reality by which the members were able to demonstrate to government the need for improved sanitation and gender sensitivity. The toilet mapping efforts has sensitised towards the discrimination which was silently caused. This had led to a "bhagidari initiative" where the active participation of civil society members and the representatives from system work together in an inclusive manner on committees responsible to the planning of city according to sanitation and gender needs. The other methods also include filing of Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in order to demand that manufacturers of sanitary pads include a means of disposal with the product. This is in light of the rising challenges of solid waste management and environmental concerns associated. The work done under the banner of Right to Pee movement, has led to inclusion of a module on gender sensitisation to the curriculum of Municipal Sanitation Officers, in order to be empathetic towards this cause and develop gender sensitive policies.

To accelerate the efforts to achieve universal sanitation coverage and to put focus on sanitation, the Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi, launched the Swachh Bharat Mission on 2nd October, 2014. The Mission aims to achieve a Swachh Bharat by 2019, as a fitting tribute to Mahatma Gandhi on his 150th birth anniversary. Understanding the significance of sanitation, Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi has simultaneously addressed the health problems that roughly half of the Indians families have to deal with due to lack of proper toilets in their homes (5). The Swachha Bharat Mission-Gramin website put forth following statistics on numbers since 2nd Oct 2014 at a glance which mentions - 1028.67 toilets built (in Lakh); there was an increase of 61.30% households with toilets; a self-declaration by 2,62,734 Gram Panchayats as Open Defecation Free (ODF); a self-declaration by 6,03,175 number of villages as Open Defecation

Free ODF Villages (6). Here the larger question to be dealt for the success of this newly built toilets, is by bring the required behavioural change towards utilisation of toilets, by considering it in the broader context of gender – safety, equity and health associated.

## **Right to Pee: Role and status globally**

Globally the right to pee movement is a part of the larger umbrella of issues related to sanitation and gender equity. The United Nations General Assembly in 2015, recognized sanitation as a distinct human right which entitles everyone to have physical and affordable access to sanitation, in all spheres of life, that is safe, hygienic, secure, and socially and culturally acceptable and that provides privacy and ensures dignity (7).

In 2015, the United Nations (UN) had set interconnected 17 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) with 169 targets as a broad and ambitious vision for till 2030. SDG 6 calls upon all Nations to “ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all”. This comes in the backdrop of poor targeting of the Millennium Development Goal (2000-2015) targets of halving the proportion of people without sustainable access to basic sanitation wasn't even reached. It should act as a constant reminder to the international community that we must leave no one behind as we expand access to safe toilets, because whoever you are, wherever you are, sanitation is your human right. Today, 4.2 billion people live without safely managed sanitation, 673 million still practise open defecation and three billion lack basic hand washing facilities.(8)

The website of World Toilet Day very rightly puts forth that Toilet is not just a Toilet – it's an opportunity maker, it's a life saver, it's a dignity provider. The World Toilet Day is an attempt to tackle the global sanitation crisis. More than half of the global population lacks adequate sanitation, which is estimated to cause 432,000 diarrheal deaths every year and is a major factor in diseases such as intestinal worms, trachoma and schistosomiasis (9). In the year 2019 –the idea of leaving no one behind drew attention to those people who were left behind without sanitation or hygienic toilet facilities, thus suffering social, economic and environmental consequences of inaction.

## **Right to Pee: Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)**

As a part of the universally agreed Sustainable Development Goals, SDG 6 has a target to eliminate open defecation and ensure everyone has access to sustainable sanitation services by 2030, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations. Tracking the meeting of sustainable development goals, we find world is struggling to meet SDG 6, statistics show only 40 out of 152 countries are on path to achieve nearly universal basic sanitation by 2030. In line with the promise of achieving SDG 6, World Toilet Day — is celebrated on every year 19th November, to raise awareness about the global sanitation crisis and inspiring an action to ensure that all people have access to proper sanitation. It also strives to help break taboos around toilets and making sanitation for all a global development priority.

The underlying theme of ‘Leaving no one behind’, is the central promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The aim is to show that poor and marginalized people are much more likely to lack safely managed sanitation services and often face discrimination based on their gender, race, religion, disability etc and must access sanitation services. World Toilet Day builds on the notion that “whoever you are, wherever you are, sanitation is your human right”, protecting this right and to building a better future requires removing the stigma and taboos around sanitation. It should be inclusive to involve each section of society, gender, class and creed in decision making processes. World Toilet Day encourages all to get involved in this global movement for toilets and sanitation for all in an effort to end the sanitation crisis globally.

## **Right to Pee: Success stories**

Mumtaz Shaikh leading activist at Right to Pee movement in Mumbai was featured in the BBC 100 Women 2015, as part of the BBC's 100 Women season, on United Nations World Toilet Day (10). She put forth firmly that safe sanitation is a huge issue in India, especially for women, this is despite the Prime Minister has vowed to end the practice. The building of physical infrastructure is not important but its utility where we find women needs to pay for use, while men can urinate for free needs to be done away with.

“Mumbai Toilet Locator” an app launched by the then municipal commissioner Ajoy Mehta. The creation of app is criticised by the activist, as it does nothing to address the core issue of creating



more toilets, which is an irony that BMC needs to understand. BMC should focus on creating more spaces of sanitation which are clean, accessible and more hygienic for the women.

The Pro-Women, Pro-Swachh India Message on “No Toilet, No Bride”, from Haryana’s Sarpanch has been the mantra for 1200 villagers from 110 villages across Haryana, Punjab and Himachal Pradesh to fight the problem of open defecation. Going in the fields to defecate is an unhygienic habit that many villagers follow in India. It is also a major cause for crimes against women. An attitudinal change from reduced spending on weddings to spending on building a toilet at home is emphasised. The essential enabling factor of this policy lies at the criteria of validating by producing a certificate from the village Sarpanch, confirming that the groom have a toilet at their home. If they fail to provide the certificate then the marriage will not be solemnized. Such examples hold lot of societal values and lessons for the community at large.

### **Right to Pee: Mainstreaming the cause**

Lack of sustained attention to bathroom equity constitutes a missed opportunity. It provides an excellent case study for exploring problems of equality and differences and whether equal protection under the law requires access, or equality of result. What would sanitary facilities look like in a world in which people were both comfortable with this aspect of embodiment and committed to enabling a maximum number of persons to participate fully in public life. For every \$1 invested in basic sanitation in urban areas, an average of \$2.5 is returned in saved medical costs and increased productivity, in rural areas, an average of \$5 is returned for every \$1 invested. (11)

The other important issue needs to be understood, with the availability of number of toilets by assessing it with the duration of usage and the activities carried out. We find that women often carry the primary responsibility for taking children to the toilet or to assist the elderly and abled. An empirical data shows about a quarter of adult women are menstruating at any given moment, which increases both their need for toilets and the time spent in the toilet. The lactating mothers many a time are faced with difficult situation on breastfeeding in public places, which leads them to use toilets to breastfeed, an activity that takes significant time. Pregnancy also contributes to women's need for more bathrooms: early pregnancy, hormonal changes increase the need to urinate, while in late pregnancy, the uterus presses on the bladder, reducing its capacity. The

other issue is of urinary tract infections which is twice as common in women as in men, with about 20 percent of women experiencing infection at some point in their lives.

The members and volunteers of the Right to Pee campaign focuses on various areas like understanding the issues, formulating a policy response, scouting ways to implement it, working with the government agencies and the stakeholders. The campaign with its strong ground foot work has helped to collate key statistics with regard to toilets, its mapping, numbers, locations, accessibility and maintenance. An active symbiotic association with Mumbai Municipal Corporation has now helped to change the term 'public toilet' to a 'public convenience block', with multi-storeyed buildings with changing rooms, bathrooms and toilets are becoming an integral to formulate a better urban sanitation plan.

## **Conclusion**

It needs to be understood, that the necessity of women for the privacy and safety should be the utmost responsibility of the administration and quintessential for the active participation for women in public life, with women-only space, the toilet/bathroom is one of the "backstage" of contemporary existence where we can disarrange and resemble our personal fronts and then magically reappear and present ourselves intact to others. The case of LGBT community should also be an integral part of Right to Pee movement which can be dealt in a holistic manner. For the transgender community accessibility to toilet/restroom has been a major issue, for the transgender activists the need for toilet spaces poses a challenge to their continued gender segregation.

It's a paradox for us, where China boast its Great Wall and Jerusalem its Western Wall, but in our neighbourhood's we claim to fame the "peeing wall", many in the neighbourhood are aware of the peeing wall as a part of daily routine, but tend to accept it by legitimizing its pee-ability factor. There is a need to mainstream the issue, accelerate the efforts by help from many stakeholders from society and develop a required policy support from the government by a suitable policy response.

Sanitation services are the basic human necessity in order to meet the needs of marginalized groups and their voices must be heard in decision making processes. In many of its judgements the apex court has liberally interpreted the Article 21 of Indian constitution, there is time to

recognise the right to sanitation for all people irrespective of gender. Efforts should be made for assessing the social impact of gender budgeting towards creating gender friendly public spaces, which includes funding for gender friendly toilets and urinals.

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