


Alternatives

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A Plea for More Participation

From the Alternatives Team

WHEN the idea was first floated that the topic of the "Alternative" page will be PUBLIC TOILET, most thought we were practicing our sense of humor! But then, realizing our seriousness, few went on to remark, 'have you people run out of topics?' We must confess here that in choosing the topic the Centre for Alternatives was led both by 'noble practices,' particularly that of Mahatma Gandhi's, and the current pitiable state of public toilet in Dhaka and other cities of Bangladesh. Gandhi, lest we forget, began his life-long campaign for a better world by constructing toilets in his ashram and advocating their cleaning by the users themselves! Aside from fulfilling basic human requirements, the purpose was to show that no work is beneath the dignity of a man or woman. In so far as the issue of public toilet in this country is concerned, nothing much has changed since then.

There are at least four issues that need to be addressed seriously. First is the number of toilets in relation to the number of people residing in cities. In Dhaka, for instance, there are only 30 toilets for 80 lakh people. The joke goes that even if you adorn all these toilets with the nicest of things, the volume of wastes that will be accumulated in one hour will make you wonder if the word 'nice' ever existed! The solution obviously lies in making more and more toilets. In this context, two things are worth pointing out. Firstly, given government's budgetary constraints, there is no point in taking the demand for better and more toilets to the government. And secondly, non-governmental organizations, including private entrepreneurs, must take up this task on an urgent basis. Indeed, 'BRAC Toilet' or 'Proshika Toilet' in different parts of the city will not only earn these NGOs an instant fame but will go on to resolve a problem for which they will be remembered for years to come.

The second issue relates to the class dimension of the problem. It is alleged that since the elite, including the policy makers of the country, seldom uses the public toilet, there is no pressure to take up the issue. If this is so, it is high time for the voting commoners to start a campaign so that this issue is included in the election manifestos of their respective political parties. Since toilet requirement is a non-partisan issue, chances are that it would be readily accepted.

The third issue relates to 'culture' and the use of toilet. In many public discussions, we have heard more than once that how badly some Bangladeshis use toilets in the aircraft when going abroad. Much of the blame was given to the factor of culturally not knowing how to use and keep the toilet clean! Also added to the cultural dimension was the point that Bangladeshis have been influenced by the age-old caste system, which took toilet cleaning as a lowly work, with responsibilities falling on the members of the lowest caste, the nomo sudras. Whatever may be the merit of this observation, few will deny the need for a 'cultural revolution' on the issue of managing toilet in general and of using it in public in particular. To meet this end, steps need to be taken at two levels. At one level, toilet management course need to be introduced and made compulsory in all primary schools, whether government, non-government or private. At another level, more for the education of the seniors, the mass media (television and radio) must be made to play its role effectively and creatively.

Last but not the least is the issue of women and public toilet. This has already been addressed separately by a fellow member of the CA in this page. We hope that the readers and those concerned will look into the matter of women's plight with all the seriousness that it deserves. Only a thorough participation of all will put an end to something that we have all long neglected.



Public toilet near GPO: Is it well maintained?

— Star photo by Amran

When the Nature Calls...

The Public Toilet of the Mega Slum

by Mahbubur Rabb Meenar

An aggressive social & political motivation is needed to build the basic civic sense among the citizenry to build a pollution free healthy city. The city dwellers should be made fully aware of the proper using of public toilets & thus free the city streets & parks from indecent looks & environment pollution.

THOUGH Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh, has been identified as the Mega Slum of the 21st century by Asia Week, the Dhakaites still wish to call it the Mega City. This city has hundreds of specialty restaurants, cyber cafes, mobile restaurants, hard rock cafes, gorgeous fountains, taxis sculptures but not a single healthy public toilet.

Dhaka city, with a population of 8.8 million & a 4 percent growth rate (according to a study of ADB), is developing in unplanned ways like the other cities of this country. According to a survey conducted by Dhaka University Urban Research Development Center the present number of slums in Dhaka are 2156 & about 700,000 people live in these slums. Rural people displaced by river erosion, unemployment or other reasons usually come to the city for livelihood or shelter. They usually take up any space left vacant for a purpose to build their shanties with insufficient utilities & services. These rural migrants accustomed to rustic life style & habits overburden the limited infrastructures made for the city residents. Slum dwellers of all age & gender usually use the drains &

sidewalks as open toilets that cause serious odour & environmental pollution. Even the major roads of Dhaka City (except some of the VIP roads) are so unclean & polluted that the rickshaw pullers, day labourers, hawkers & beggars just can't imagine using a public toilet by paying a taka or some paisa.

Besides them, many so-called educated persons (both students & professionals) do the similar job by using footpaths as open-air public toilets. But some of them have their explanations. The inadequate number of public toilets (especially for the women - as if they don't need to use toilets outside their houses), their improper & unplanned placement & above all the unhygienic, poor condition simply encourage the common people to urinate on the sidewalks, boundary walls or in the parks. The most interesting or irritating thing is many people squat right next to the public toilets. The pedestrians who use footpaths suffer the most.

How many people of this metropolitan city know the proper using of a toilet? I am sure the number is very limited. We really try to keep our drawing rooms or bedrooms neat & clean, but toilet? - No way. Similarly whenever we enter a public toilet, be it in an office or in a market, cinema hall, rail station, stadium - what so ever, we simply don't care about its cleanliness. DCC gives out 1 year leases to private compa-

nies for the maintenance of the public toilets. Usually no inspection is carried out after the formalities. Poor maintenance, irregular water supply, unconditioned toilet fixtures, improper ventilation, lack of attention of the toilet users etc can make the entrance to Dhaka's any public toilet very forbidding. DCC seems quite satisfied with the current state of these toilets.

But the Dhakaites aren't. Now it's high time to think seriously about the public toilets.

Role of DCC:

DCC should at first calculate the actual number of public toilets needed by the Dhakaites considering the daily migration of the rural people. For this calculation they may seek advice from different professionals or NGOs.

Then it should go for proper zoning that means the appro-

govt.'s support. After giving lease to private companies, DCC must make the necessary inspections at a regular interval. If necessary, it should've the authority to cancel the contract at any time.

The system of placing the public toilets should be changed. It is DCC's duty to clean not only the front portion of the toilets but also the other dirty streets & dustbins regularly. Only a clean & hygiene street can discourage a person to squat besides it.

New Planning System:

A) Small-scale public toilets can be designed in a modular basis. The module may be incorporated along with the bus stands of various routes of the city. It may comprise of the following functions:
waiting area
ticket selling counter
small stationary shop & public toilet

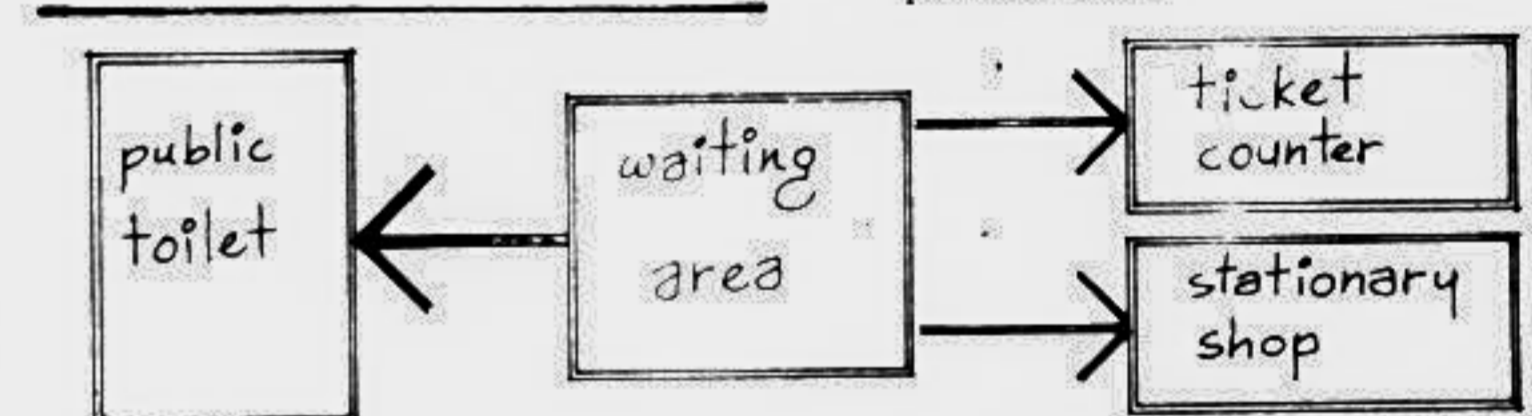


FIG: FLOW CHART OF A MODULE

Special considerations should be taken designing this module. The entrance of the toilet should be indirect & separate. Continued on page 7



Public toilet near Farmgate... beggars description.

— Star photo by Anisur Rahman

Making the Toilets 'Public'

by Syed Imtiaz Ahmed

Construction of adequate number of public toilets in the city where space problem has grown acute, will no doubt pose a problem. In this regard one alternative could be the setting up of mobile public toilets, a system reportedly undertaken in Khulna.

IN this modern Dhaka city there is only one public toilet for approximately three hundred thousand people. Sounds absurd? But it is true. The city of Dhaka, with a population of almost nine million, has only thirty public toilets. And these public toilets may be physically there, but whether they are fit for public use is another matter. Whether the Dhaka-dwellers are concerned about the problem is also a question that needs to be probed. The need for public toilets in a city like Dhaka as a utility service is yet to take root in the minds of general people. This has been my experience while having a look at the state of public toilets.

The problem is not only the lack of awareness; but also the qualitative and quantitative inadequacies of public toilets. In fact, while probing into this problem, I felt that the relevant authorities have constructed thirty public toilets in the city as show pieces of our 'modern' attitude, rather than as utility services.

About the condition of toilets for the commoners almost all the users I talked with, were unanimous on one point that the toilets are disgusting in all respects. The members of the relatively affluent and educated sections try to avoid the use of public toilets. They identified the stinky, unhealthy conditions of the toilets to be the major factor behind their avoidance.

The members of the less affluent and less educated sections are the frequent users of public toilets. Though most of them do not approve of the facilities, yet they accept it as fate accomplished. Muhammad Ismail, a rickshaw-puller commented, "We live in dirty, unhealthy slums so using 'dirty, unhy-

gienic public toilets does not make much of a difference to us." Harun Ahmed, a former minibus driver described the terrible conditions of the public toilets in Fulbaria where two bricks are set upon an underground garbage tank and that is where he used to do his 'regular morning duties.' Some of the respondents also complained that the water kept for use in some of the public toilets is very dirty.

I went to several public toilets located in the following areas: Gulistan, G.P.O., Kalabagan and Nilkhet area to check on the conditions of public toilets. The one in Kalabagan which has been newly constructed is relatively better than the others. It had lights inside the stalls and one could see where one was stepping into. Also, the water supply and other facilities were within the level of human tolerance. The condition of the public toilets in other areas was horrible. The stalls were so narrow that it is difficult for a person to move. There is lack of proper lighting arrangements in these toilets. To add to the woes there is the absence of flushing and water removal facilities. As a result the pans are clogged with human waste. Moreover, the stalls are always wet, consequently they get soiled by the dirt carried in by people's shoes. The toll collector of one of the public toilets said that there is a permanent cleaner who cleans after every 10-15 minutes. But when I drew his attention to the

state of the latrines he could not give any proper answer rather, his attitude was that one should not expect more.

From The Authorities Desk:

The public toilets in the city are leased to individual bidders by the City Corporation under several conditions. These are: the leaseholder would be responsible for keeping the toilets hygienically clean, prevent anti-social activities inside the toilets, make sure that the male users do not use the toilets marked for women. However, the maintenance of the toilet building, ensuring proper lighting and water facilities remain under the authority of the City Corporation. It should be noted that the City Corporation has not set any specific criteria for a clean toilet. For instance, keeping soaps in a public toilet has not been made compulsory. Before granting lease the City Corporation does not take into account the previous performance of a leaseholder. There is also no well defined monitoring and supervision system for the toilets.

The leaseholders have a wide range of complaints against the City Corporation. They point out that the process through which the City Corporation handles the maintenance of the physical infrastructure of the toilets is over bureaucratic, for instance if a complain is lodged to the City Corporation about broken glasses or problems with water supply, the com-

plaint is first dealt by the engineering section which passes on the required material list to the mayor's office. After assessing the requirements a tender is called by the City Corporation.

The whole process is sometimes so lengthy that one leaseholder's term is often over, and the new leaseholder has to start the process all over again. Also, the leaseholders openly acknowledged that because of this lengthy process they sometimes have to bribe the DESA and WASA men for keeping the supply of electricity and water regular. Due to this they have to charge Taka 2.00 from the users while the actual rate as set by the City Corporation is Taka 1.50.

What is To be Done:

A wide range of suggestions have been made by the Dhakaites. Most of the respondents felt the need for regular monitoring by the City Corporation. Many thought that if the educated urban middle class could be encouraged to use the toilets their overall condition might improve. They also opined that people ought to be fined if they urinate in footpaths if a public toilet is situated nearby. They expressed the need for taking up awareness raising programs by the NGOs specially in slum areas about the proper use of toilet facilities. The City Corporation could also project same through posters, handbills and advertisements in the media. The media itself could play an im-

portant role in this regard.

To make a remedy of the sorry state of affairs the total authority of public toilets could be transferred to the NGOs or to private sectors. The two could even work in collaboration. Leading NGOs of the country may set up their own public toilets and thus contribute a lot towards improving the quality of civic life. However, according to an unidentified source two public toilets, one in the Farmgate area and the other near Gulistan underpass have been given over to NGO management, but during the last two years no marked improvement has taken place.

People also suggested the formation of local committees in different areas to which the public toilet authorities would remain accountable.

It should be kept in mind that construction of adequate number of public toilets in the city where space problem has grown acute, will no doubt pose a problem. In this regard one alternative could be the setting up of mobile public toilets, a system reportedly undertaken in Khulna. Also, construction of a public toilet could be made mandatory for every petrol pump.

Our traditional conservative attitude towards the entire matter is not helping us in any way. If we love this city and want to make it a better living place, the issue of public toilets should be considered among other problems and needs of the city. NGOs, government authorities and especially the young social researchers should come up with more creative suggestions for ensuring safe, healthy and clean public toilets for the citizens.

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