

URBAN PUBLIC TOILET

Imagination is more important than knowledge
— Albert Einstein

The Neglected Millions : Women and Public Toilets

by Sohela Nazneen

Most of the time women suppress their thirst and ignore their bodily needs. And most of them do pay a high price for it. . . . Seventy percent of the females in Bangladesh suffer from urinary tract infection. Though this is a curable disease, recurring infection (caused by not drinking enough water / suppressing the call of nature/ or not using clean toilet facilities since this infection is communicable) can seriously affect the kidney, bladder or the urethra.

DHAKA, the metropolitan capital of Bangladesh, virtually has no public toilets for the millions of female 'Dhakaite' who have to use the public space for any length of time. Women rarely use the thirty public toilets leased out by the City Corporation because of their unhygienic conditions and security problems. Very few of the toilets at the offices, educational institutions, shopping complexes— that is if these places have toilets at all for women—are in 'decent' usable condition. Ignoring the call of nature, suppressing thirst, limiting one's liquid intake and being under psychological pressure that one will have to 'rush-home-to-relieve-one's-need' are very common experiences of female 'Dhakaite's that cut across class, educational level or social status. However, this significant day to day problem faced by all women in the public sphere has received scant or no attention from the policymakers, City Corporation, commercial or educational institutions, media or even the women's organizations. As one angry young female researcher put it, "Women were never a part of 'public'. We are women not human—we are supposed to put up with anything. So why should anyone bother about public amenities for women?"

The Alternative team asked some female 'Dhakaite's from different classes to share their tales of misery and to suggest course of action that could be taken for establishing proper public toilet facilities for women. The experiences that respondents described were horrible. Some of them were funny while others were heart-breaking. However, the women's anger, frustration and helplessness were palpable when they recounted their tales.

Tales of Misery: The Problem That Has No Name

The interviews revealed that the adolescent and adult female

'Dhakaite's are the modern day incarnations of Tantalus. One construction worker stated that she drinks water at the crack of dawn and does not drink anything till dusk. She said, "If I do, then where will I go?" The scenario is not very different for females of other economic classes, NGO workers, service holders, students, professionals, all limit their water intake if they have to stay out for a few hours. As one university student put it, "If you drink water while you are out, then there will be a 'kaffara' (penance) for it." Working, traveling, shopping, going to school or on picnics can be nightmares for women. One young school teacher described the situation, "By the end of the day whether I am traveling or shopping or at school I start counting the moments when I will be back home so that I could use the toilet."

The women have tried in their own way to manage the problem. Some Dhaka university students said that in desperate situation they go to the Sheraton Hotel or to a friend's house in the neighbourhood to relieve themselves. One young kindergarten teacher recounted that during her second pregnancy her car was stuck in a traffic jam at Kakrail. She thanked God that she was able to reach the Sheraton Hotel in time and the fact that the Hotel was there to offer its facilities.

Otherwise, something embarrassing might have happened since she lived in Uttara at that time. Another middle aged service holder who has diabetes recounted that a few years ago she walked into an unknown house and demanded to use their toilet in a case of emergency. "They were bewildered and shocked at my demand. But they complied. Nowadays I would not dare. They would think I am a member of a gang or something." However, not all women are lucky in with these alternative strategies.

Most of the time women suppress their thirst and ignore their bodily needs. And most of

them do pay a high price for it. It was shocking to know that all non-resident Dhaka University students interviewed had urine infection at some point in their academic career at the university. One graduate student described the situation, "Most of my non-resident friends had it during Honors second or third year when we had to spend the whole day at the university because the class schedule was planned that way. None of us drank water or went to the bathroom. Thanks to Dhaka University and lack of public toilet facilities we were running to the doctor within two weeks."

Dhaka University students are not isolated cases. Seventy percent of the females in Bangladesh suffer from urinary tract infection. Though this is a curable disease, recurring infection (caused by not drinking enough water / suppressing the call of nature/ or not using clean toilet facilities since this infection is communicable) can seriously affect the kidney, bladder or the urethra. Moreover, during pregnancy urine infection can be a matter of life and death. One school teacher stated that she suffered immensely during her second pregnancy because of urine infection and had to quit her job.

Pregnant women are the worst victims of lack of toilet facilities in the public space. During pregnancy one has to drink a lot of liquid and one's control over the bladder is weakened. In extreme cases if a pregnant woman does not use the toilet for long hours the toxic materials that were to be disposed as waste can enter the bloodstream. In these cases, the urea level or the albumin rate can be high in the blood that

may lead to toxic pregnancy resulting in oedema (swelling of legs) or even eclampsia. One homemaker recalled that during her third pregnancy she had to travel back and forth from Chittagong to Dhaka for family reasons. She did not drink enough water and was unable to use the toilets on the train. Her albumin rate went up and she had to undergo treatments. She said that both she and her child could have died.

Moreover, all respondents pointed out that the most difficult days were the days during menstruation (monthly cycle) since they cannot change or dispose the sanitary napkins and are in constant fear of soiling their clothes and the resultant public humiliation. "I pray to God that I will not have long work hours or have to travel on those days," said one researcher. A part-time house worker commented, "I cannot skip work those days but the constant fear of soiling my clothes is horrible."

'Women Not 'Hu'man
The women blamed the prevalent cultural attitudes such as 'toilet is a private thing' and women are 'private', modest beings who should not make such crude and 'indecent' demands in public, as factors contributing to the societal apathy towards this crucial problem faced by women. They also pointed out that since women started coming out and working and going to school in greater numbers in the eighties, the focus has been on 'family re-adjustment', power relations, violence against women in public space, how children suffer because the mother is not home etc. The lack of proper toilet facilities has been seen as a less impor-

tant issue. Furthermore, the women also felt that the male decision makers and service providers at various public institutions and agencies are not only ignorant of women's needs but also apathetic towards meeting those needs.

The respondents also mentioned that there has been no outrage on the societal level (that lack of proper toilet facilities do not exist for women and men) because men can and often do relieve themselves at street corners. This was the prevalent feeling among women of all classes. The respondents felt that women have been silent on this issue because culturally talking about biological functions is taboo. One young school teacher pointedly said "Women publicly demanding proper toilet facilities and talking about excrement, defecation, urine infection, sanitary napkins goes against the 'lajabati' (shy) image expected by the society." This was echoed by the illiterate/ semi-literate.

Low income male respondents who were asked to comment on this lack of public toilet facilities for women in another survey carried out by the Alternative team. They argued that there was no need for public toilets for women since 'they can do their business at home' or if the women work as part-time house workers they can use the facilities of that house. However, the educated men thought differently although they confessed that they had never really taken the matter seriously.

The women pointed out that unhygienic conditions and bad toilet habits of the users also prevent them from using the existing facilities. Many stated that, "Culturally the

Bangladeshis emphasize personal hygiene but we do not teach ourselves or our children the proper use of community or civic facilities.

What Women Want: Redefining 'Public'

The respondents suggested some very basic solutions of this problem.

(1) **Public Awareness:** The women wanted awareness raising process to focus on three fronts: (a) why this is a vital issue for women (and for men), (b) ways of resolving this problem, (c) proper ways of using public toilets. The respondents suggested that the City Corporation, NGOs, women's organizations, print and electronic mass media all can collaborate on this issue. Seminars, roundtables, dialogues can be organized between the policymakers, service providers and stakeholders on deciding what steps should be taken to resolve this problem. The media (both print and electronic) can also play a proactive role. The women also pointed out that problems experienced by women should not be limited to "women's page" in the newspapers or "women's programs" on TV/radio.

The women also stated that women themselves need to overcome the existing cultural attitude and be vocal about their demands. Several respondents angrily joked that sometimes they get so frustrated that they wished that women would start squatting down by the drains in broad daylight! They felt such drastic actions may open the eyes of the society!! Some respondents suggested that women voters and women's organizations should pres-

sure the City Corporation officials and ward commissioners to include this issue in the agenda for next election.

Many of the respondents also made some innovative suggestions regarding awareness raising on proper use of public toilets. They felt TV and radio skits, advertisements, handbills and posters by the City Corporation (as they do for unpaid taxes) may help. A few suggested that to reach the mass, these skits and ads could be shown before films at the cinema halls. Some respondents wanted 'proper public toilet' use to be introduced in textbooks. One young school teacher thought that cartoons could be an effective way of passing the message to the children (especially innovative and popular cartoon characters as Meena). According to the respondents the slogan in this area should be 'catch them young.' They also felt that NGOs could play an effective role in slums making people aware about the health hazards and how to use toilets properly.

(2) **Construction of Public Toilets and Regular Maintenance:** All respondents wanted separate public toilets (or at least separate entrances) for women and proper maintenance of the existing toilets. They suggested that the City Corporation officials of the health and sanitation department should pay surprise visits to see how the existing toilets are being maintained by the leaseholders. Some respondents mentioned that NGOs working in the health sector could be included in the monitoring process in the areas they are working in. The women demanded the following facilities in the public toilets: proper water supply, lighting system, 'badnas', covered bins, reliable female cleaners and security guards.

The respondents acknowledged the fact that the City Corporation had resource constraints but they argued that the City Corporation could start with a few and then increase the number of toilets. Some even

pointed out that they were willing to pay extra Taka five/ten as tax for public toilet construction project. Several respondents stressed that proper monitoring system and accountability should be established otherwise construction of new toilets would not solve the problem. One kindergarten teacher mentioned with appreciation her experience of using the Fayed lake zoo public toilet two years ago in Chittagong. "It smelled of dettol. The 'ayah' cleaned it after everytime it was used. And people of different classes were using it. And this was not in some fairytale land or 'bidesh' (foreign country) but here in Bangladesh. So you see it is possible to have clean public toilets, what you need is good will and responsibility."

Many respondents felt that public toilets should be built by the government or NGOs in slum areas (and these toilets should be free of charge, cleaned by the slum dwellers). The women overwhelmingly expressed that Indian pans were more hygienic and public toilets should have Indian pans.

(3) **Community Initiative:** Some respondents suggested that local committees could be formed to monitor the maintenance of public toilets in collaboration with the ward commissioners in their respective areas. The respondents pointed out that local women should be adequately represented in these committees. Some even thought that these committees could set up their own maintenance programs and collect money from the locality for this purpose. However, the women cautioned that the committee members should be educated, responsible persons not political mastans imposed by the local political groups.

The female urbanites need to stick to their guns and start pushing the issue. It is time for women to be more aware of it is about time that the policy and decision makers, service providers and the media woke up and got involved.

The writer is fellow, Centre for Alternatives



No public toilet... so public nuisance unabated!

— Star photo by Anisur Rahman

The Public Toilet of the Mega Slum

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from the other 3 functions. Again the design should be such that common people can easily notice its presence. One important thing is to keep the toilet properly ventilated—both by design & implementation.

B) Large-scale toilets can be built near busy nodes of some important areas of the city following the suggestions of the town planners. But they should be placed having sufficient setback from the roads. Some sort of visual barriers also needed.

C) In case of designing the public toilet in the park or other recreational public spaces, the appropriate location, visual barrier & cleanliness should be given maximum priority.

Growth of Consciousness of the City Dwellers:

The "National Sanitation Week '98" brought forth some important issues concerning the shelter less people or the slum dwellers. Now everyone

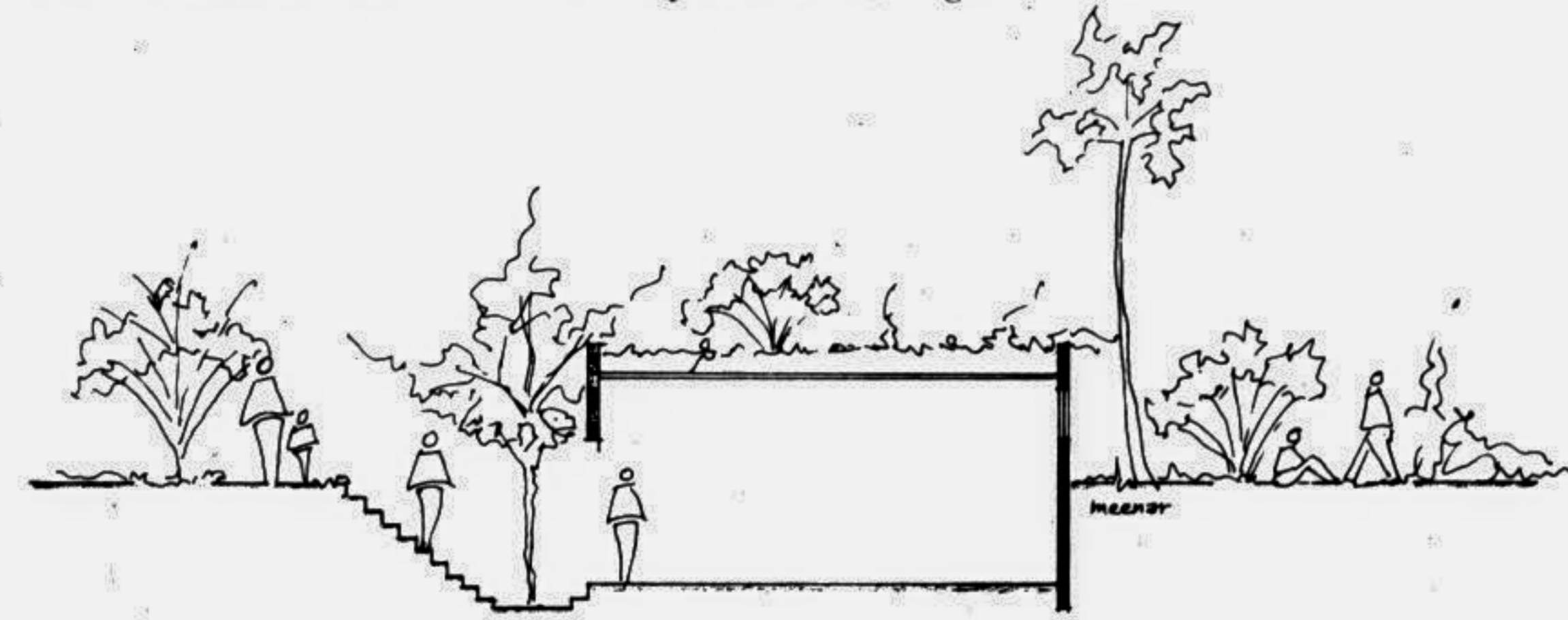
knows that the problem of public health sector of the city cannot be resolved if the 30%-50% of the city dwellers, who live in the slums, are left without the basic amenities.

However, an aggressive social & political motivation is needed to build the basic civic

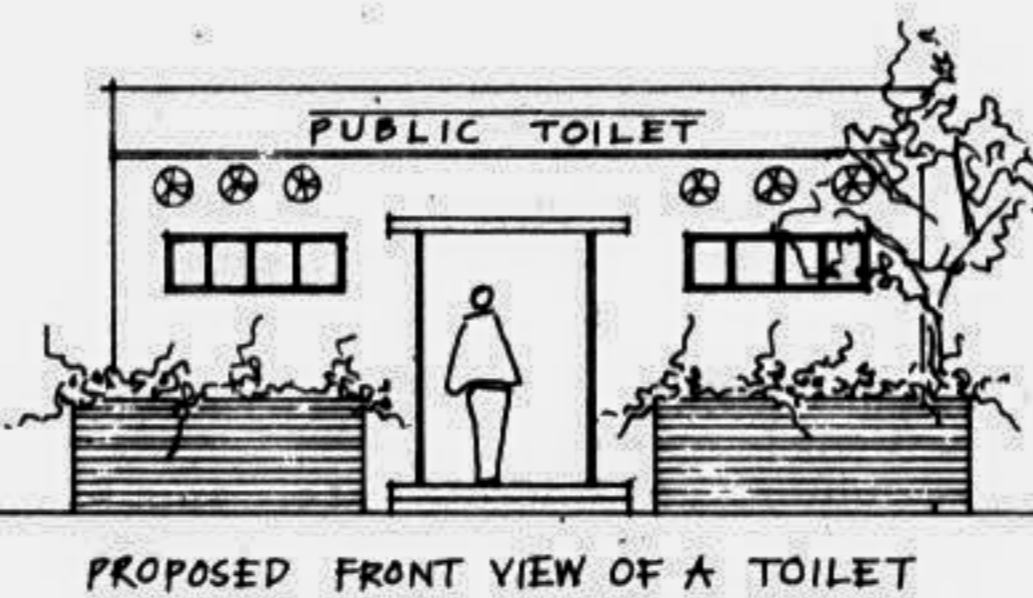
sense among the citizenry to build a pollution free healthy city. The city dwellers should be made fully aware of the proper use of public toilets & thus free the city streets & parks from indecent looks & environment pollution. The media can help a lot in this regard.

The NGOs, other social organizations or personnel also may take necessary initiatives to provide primary education about sanitation & health both at grass root & upper level.

The writer is an Architect & a faculty member in Exterior-Interior Pvt. Ltd.



A SEMI BASEMENT PUBLIC TOILET INSIDE A PARK



PROPOSED FRONT VIEW OF A TOILET

The topic for the next issue of *Alternatives* is "Towards a Deteriorated Campus." Creative suggestions are invited from our esteemed readers. Please send your materials to: Dr Imtiaz Ahmed, Executive Director, Centre for Alternatives, Room No 431, Lecture Theatre, Arts Building, Dhaka University, Dhaka-1000. Tel: 9661900-59, Ext. 4550; Fax: (8802) 836769; E-mail: imtiaz@bangla.net

Spotlight on Micro Issues

by A Husnain

NATURE'S call (to hum-an body functions) cannot be tarried or parried. When out in Dhaka city, suddenly the emergency question crops up "Where is the nearest public toilet?" The DCC toilet may not be near, or may not even exist in most of the locations, especially in the shopping areas.

The priority to this call is independent of age, politics, time and place. The situation cannot be evaded or avoided, postponed or kept pending (as we know from the classical story in the comedy book of the king travelling in a small boat, who had to declare emergency for immediate shore landing).

Wash-rooms are not high-tech, and no imported component is involved. All citizens of Bangladesh can boast of personal experience in this field.

For many years, day in and day out; even when unemployed, whether poor or rich. The rich can rush home in a Taka ten lakh car, but the middle class bhadraokh is lost searching for a public toilet within walking distance, even when willing to part with two taka per entry. The poor freely practice democratic outlets without any discrimination to location and privacy. We are learning transparency, but the wrong way. Alas, this freely available ammonia gas escapes into the air, and cannot be tapped for recycling.

The DCC (Disabled Civic Centre?) constructed some public toilets in the recent past, but the supply is much less than the huge demand for belly exercises in public — nearly a fun-

damental right for each and every citizen. The assessment report on the Dhaka Public Toilet Pilot Project is yet to be released. The psychologists had always warned of the danger of repressing essential functions, and recommended provision for suitable outlets, in the domestic, private and public sectors. There must be a post of Psychologist in the DCC. Social scientists can also contribute in this specialised field.

The allocations in the 5-Year Plan and the ADP are utterly inadequate to cope with the popular demand for urinals, toilets, wash rooms, powder rooms, WCs and allied outlets. The DCC is yet to clarify whether BOO and/or BOT measures were proving successful, with or without value-added tax

(VAT — what value is added in this operation? Is there VAT on waste disposal also? That would be the finishing touch!).

Any way, the authorities may consider mass production of public toilet kits, with modular expansion facility, for accelerated installation in the major cities in the first phase, according priority to private sector investment. Even the popular 'sanitary latrines' may be tried in tandem in locations where sewerage system is not available. Professional and regular users of the public latrines (as in the markets and shopping centres) may buy monthly or annual passes at reduced prices.

The message of this representation is simple: accord macro attention to micro projects. Post-script: make the toilets user-friendly.

Brief Prescriptions

Compiled by Star Correspondent

can be made to use the nice, clean toilets of these mosques — free for all. Anyone can look forward to use the toilet in a mosque whenever s/he feels the necessity."
— Tarek K. M. BBA Student, Jahangirnagar University.

"ADEQUATE number of public toilets have to be built in places of public importance, especially at the shopping malls and the bus stops. These can either be built by the Municipal Corporation or the Municipal authority can lease out every key points or selected places in the city to private ownership to build the toilets so that the private owners themselves can ensure cleanliness and healthy environment inside these toi-

lets.
The law enforcement authorities have to 'efficient' in discouraging people from using the side walks and road corners for easing themselves. However, before strict law is enforced, the public have to be made aware of the dire consequences of excretion in open public places. A team should be formed comprising Municipal and law enforcing personnel to work for this purpose and to be vigilant against the non-compliers. The team must ensure cleanliness, hygiene, healthy environment and availability of the require facility. This team, however, will work under the jurisdiction of the Municipal authority.

The water supply has to be ensured all the time, because continuous water supply is indispensable for public toilets.



They find it easy to ease outside!

— Star photo

"The authority should also provide sanitary facilities to slum-dwellers as they constitute a large number who are, to some extent, responsible for the act of excretion in open public places. The authority can work in association with the non-governmental organizations which are already working in sanitation, healthcare etc., sectors."
— AFM Mohiuddin

"THE ultimate responsibility lies with the authority which is supposed to keep the city clean and provide the city-dwellers with the minimum requirements. I am sure enough that the authority is well aware of the necessities of public toilets and how these can be managed in our cities. However, the following steps can be taken immediately:

- Construct adequate number of public toilets in Dhaka city and those should be in places where the crowd is dense; for example: marketplaces, bus stands, shopping complexes etc.

- All the shopping complexes should have public toilets and customers should have easy accessibility to those. After all, one is not likely to ask the shopkeeper where the toilet is or whether the shopkeeper can provide one with the toilet key.

- All the gas stations within the city and on the highway should have public toilets.

- All the hotels and restaurants, those cater for more than 50 customers should have toilets.

- Mosques, temples and other places of worship can provide this service to the people keeping sanctity of those places intact.
- All the high-rise buildings in the city should have toilets in their basements."
— Dr. Debashis Saha
64, North Brook Hall Road, Dhaka 1100