

Pune Community Toilets Stops and Starts at Shanti Nagar

The community at Shanti Nagar, Yerawada, took over the management of their new toilet block in April 2000. The community will be managing and maintaining the toilets with the support of SA and the Baandhani collective.

The women staying opposite the toilets came up with the idea of a wall to shield the entrance to the gents' stalls... The painting and murals were done by Rajendra More who lives in Shanti Nagar



The old toilet had 12 stalls, only for gents. But kids usually come along to the toilet with their mums, so if there isn't a ladies' toilet there can't really be a kids' toilet either.

What's more, when we carried out a survey of Shanti Nagar, we found that there were already fewer seats for women than men. There was a lot of discussion about this with the community. The community suggested having three women's stalls in the new one. This made sense according to the toilet to person ratio and was agreed upon.

Demolition of the old block - the old one was only for gents, but the new one has three ladies' toilets and a children's toilet



Construction at Shanti Nagar hasn't been without problems... but that's inevitable in any new community project and part of the learning process which feeds into and improves subsequent efforts.



The entrance to the ladies', behind the wall that shields for privacy. The kids' toilet is just the other side of the wall on a paved platform over the septic tank

The story of the first Shanti Nagar block highlights the sort of issues that have come up throughout the whole toilet project.

Work began in November, and immediately threw up a major challenge. The toilets are sited on a slope, just below one of the settlement's gutters. This wouldn't be a problem, except that these gutters are old, cracked and leaky. Every day the site labourers had to spend 2-3 hours just baling out water that had seeped into the old tank overnight. Even so, it was just a few days before the old tank, just recently cleared of muck, had filled with water and become a dangerous hazard for children.



Water from the cracked gutters seeped in and filled up the old tank, which delayed the work at Shanti Nagar considerably

Meanwhile, the residents of Shanti Nagar had seen their old block pulled down, and no sign of any new toilets. An old filthy toilet is better than none at all, and certainly better than a deep and dangerous tank of water in the middle of your settlement. Understandably, the local people were upset.

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Construction under way at last - that's the septic tank on the left



We rushed in a pump to deal with the situation, but without electricity this wasn't much use. The local ward office was overworked and couldn't supply the necessary connection in time, so we resorted to borrowing electricity from one of the neighbouring houses. This supply was only 5Amp, so the whole operation risked blowing the fuse and short-circuiting, but the priority was to deal with the hazardous tank urgently.

Up to this point all work had been done in at least an ankle's depth of water. The ward office came and built a channel to drain the water from the tank. This solved the water seepage problem, but uncovered another: it revealed a regular RCC slab at 3' depth, which must have been built for the old toilet block because the black cotton soil here is so soft. The most sensible option was simply to leave it and build on it, but that meant raising the whole structure by 2' to accommodate the 5' deep septic tank which has to be the lowest point.

Then there was yet another thing to smooth out...the water connection was insufficient. A single tap had to be used for the construction and by the residents for their domestic use. This meant that site workers and local women were in effect competing to use the same tap. The situation was only eased once the separate water connection was finally made at the end of January. And then to cap it all, one night some people came in off the street, stole some materials from the site, and beat up the watchman and his wife.

Once all these hiccups had finally been sorted out, work continued as usual and the residents started to take more interest.

As the community watched the new block going up, they started to contribute ideas. One community input to the design has been the walls shielding the entrances to the ladies' and gents'.

It's a very tight site in a high-density area, and it's awkward for women to be able to see into the gents' toilets and for men to see into the ladies'.

It's a question of privacy. And no-one wants to come out of their front door and see straight into a toilet. So the women staying opposite came up with the idea of constructing shielding walls in front of the doors.

When it comes to the caretaker's room, the community's plan is to use it as a function room which residents can hire out for events. The money will go towards the upkeep of the toilets. The caretaker is Sandeep, a young man who lives in Shanti Nagar. He's been very keen and, the residents are so far happy with his work. He's suggested using the room as a community office as well.



Some of the littler folk who are using the new toilets. The very smallest have their own special kids' toilets.

After the inauguration, another problem reared its head. Any septic tank takes a couple of weeks to settle down and work effectively. Until then you can expect a bit of a smell. But at Shanti Nagar, the stink got worse. It transpired that some idiot had come and dropped a dead animal in the tank, so the maggots were working overtime inside and couldn't deal with everything that needed decomposing all at once. Then the nightmare got worse and little white maggots started wiggling their way out of the tank. We put in some more bio-sanitisers, sealed off the tank and spread bleaching powder round the toilet. After a few days it all settled down, the maggots disappeared back into the tank, and now it doesn't stink at all.

In Shanti Nagar, the first toilet has provided a real opportunity to bring people together to discuss their toilet needs and other issues in their settlement.

Difficulties arose, but the community showed a lot of patience and did choose to get involved. The result is a more united group of people who are ready to take on the management of their new toilet block.

