

Sanitation Culture, Language and Communication in India: Dealing with Resistant People and Inflexible Communicators

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Abstract

One daunting question among the development professionals working in the sanitation sector in India is: *(Enough) awareness has been created in order to make them realise this undesirable open defecation practice – WHY DON'T THEY CHANGE?* Unable to find an answer to this question, they end up dismissing the question as 'resistance to change'. They conclude that rural people generally are hesitant about any new initiative; and are unchanging; or unwilling to change their old ways of doing things. An analysis of culture, language and communication patterns can provide clearer ways of explaining and understanding human behavior. This paper brings in several elements of sanitation culture, including language and communication. It shows what causes community resistance; and the strategies our health communicators need to put to use in order to bring about mental alignment. It puts across that rural people being mentally conditioned is natural as a result of their limited exposure to toilet use – most probably the public toilets they happened to visit - like the ones in bus stands - where as a rule it is stinky. Understanding what causes the resistance or what gives rise to their saying 'no' is the key to make a breakthrough in mental conditioning. There are cultural artifacts and symbols that this paper brings up with a view to combating mental conditioning. Unfortunately, we have many inflexible communicators who go on a verbal diarrhea pushing things at the wrong time and in the wrong direction with some clichéd communication methods and tools.

Key Words: Toilet use, Resistance to Change, Cultural Practices, Development Communication

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Introduction

The Government of India (GoI) on 2nd October 2014 launched Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA) with a mission of achieving clean India by 2nd October 2019, when the nation shall celebrate the 150th birth day of Mahatma Gandhi. There are varied projections – some optimistic and hopeful; and others pessimistic and cynical. Those - like this author - aspiring to realize the splendid dream of ‘Clean India’ keep guard of cynicism and move ahead. Estimations and projections apart, one thing that is clear is Indian villages are still a long way from a clean India. While open defecation is a serious problem in Indian villages; irresponsible disposal of household waste is increasingly making urban areas unlivable. The culture is, rural Indians, without a speck of hesitation can defecate on the streets in the nights; and behind bushes during daytime. It is no problem for them. That is very normal and common – to perceive *doing it in the open as no problem*. Generally, what everyone does becomes normal. ‘Doing it in the open’ is no problem because everyone does that. It has nearly been a social norm that everyone perceives that *it does not matter*. Rural society tends to view it as a normal happening everywhere. There is nothing to refute if one called it ‘insanitation culture’.

Culture can provide ways of explaining and understanding human behavior. Talking about social norms in India, let us digress for a while, to funerals in rural India. Being assured of a decent funeral remains a high priority for many in Indian villages. And not being able to properly burn (or bury) and pay last respects to a deceased person one can put the honour of the family in jeopardy. In India, (like it is in many other poorer countries of the world) funerals take on important symbolic and cultural significance. Even today funerals continue to assume overriding significance to demonstrate a family’s prestige to the extent that financing of a funeral, especially for poorer families, can exhaust resources and send a family into debt. Social norm demands it that way; for otherwise, it puts a family into *acute embarrassment* in the society.

I draw this example, not to abate the importance of a decent funeral, but as it renders us appalled when we draw a parallel to defecating in the open being accepted and practiced, despite more than a decade of campaign against it, and all out support by Government of India for constructing household toilets. There is *no embarrassment* about defecating in the open. Perhaps, all the street plays and jingles of our health educators from Public Health Engineering Department (PHED), and staff of the Sanitation Mission are heard as verbal diarrhea these regiments are suffering from.

Progress so far: In sanitation front, we have some of the Indian states that have progressed the most like Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh, Mizoram, and Kerala that stand out as the best performing states. Others, like Punjab, Haryana, Maharashtra, and West Bengal have done relatively well too. However, states like Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Odisha and Uttar Pradesh are stuck in the bottom with low coverage and low progress (Government of India, 2015). Here, the number of toilets constructed is only one part of the story, the other side of it – that is how many (or what percentage of) toilets are actually put to use is a bigger question that is very pertinent. In fact, the latter half (‘the other side’) of the question is what answers ‘whether a sanitation mission is successful or not’.

Toilets constructed, remaining unused due to trivial reasons like that of the proverbial rhyme ‘want of a horse shoe nail’ is widespread. Percentage of toilets reported as unused is implausible. Down to Earth (Down to Earth, 2014) reports that about 67 per cent of the toilets constructed are not used in Jharkhand; 59 per cent in Chhattisgarh; 30 per cent in Tamil Nadu; 26 per cent in Madhya Pradesh; and 24 per cent in Rajasthan. Based on the current trends in the pace of construction some states and UTs (e.g Bihar, Odisha and Puducherry) is really a matter of serious concern. Countries such as Sri Lanka and Bangladesh are reporting 94 – 96 per cent coverage of household latrines. Rural China’s coverage is higher by 14% compared to India’s rural sanitation coverage.

The not so uncommon Joke: Mobile phones vis-a-vis Toilets in India

In India, drawing a parallel between mobile phone ownership and toilets has become a well-known joke by now. In fact, it was Census-2011 that brought to light that Indians do not have a

toilet at home, but well over half of the population owns a mobile phone. As of March 2014 India had 933 million telephone subscribers (wireless and landline). Annual toilet addition is about 4 million (Down to Earth, 2014). This paradox (or absurdity, as some may call it!) invites comparison, although basically tele-density is also an important indicator of development; and it makes little sense drawing a comparison between mobile phone ownership and toilet ownership. Yet, what invites comparison is our inquisitiveness to figure out the logic behind the priorities and preferences of the Indian mindset.

Owning a mobile phone has become a social norm. Almost everyone has one, and everyone uses it, maintains it as functional – the least to be able to give a ‘missed call’. It has become very ‘normal’ even in Indian villages to ask someone: ‘Let me have your number’. The point is we don’t ask in the first place, if s/he owns a mobile phone. We expect or assume him/her to have one, and ask for the number so as to be in touch. Norms are informal understandings that govern individual’s behaviour in a society. So, the ownership of mobile phone has almost become a widespread social norm that everybody has one. It sounds strange, if someone responded today: *I am sorry. I don’t have a mobile phone*. It is a cultural or societal expectation you possess one. It is an *exhibited* behaviour, the society approves of. This is what sociologists call informal understanding that governs societal behaviour.

In social norm there are things that are spoken about (exhibited), and those that are not discussed explicitly (Abraham, 2006). Social norms can be enforced formally (e.g. through sanctions in a Gram Sabha / Community Association), or informally (e.g. through body language and non-verbal communication cues). The non-verbal cue or body language that we have observed is talking about ‘*toilets and defecating*’ is an undesirable social norm. This can be observed clearly when menstrual hygiene is to be discussed by a health worker. He watches out who are all present, to make sure there is no one from his family around; and the place where it is discussed etc. Although his duty demands him to talk about it, the social norm (the way he has been socialized) makes him feel uncomfortable. The cultural expectation or social norm is either he does not mention about it in public, or he talks about it very discreetly and finishes off. This is more so especially when the health educator is a male. This goes with the social norm that expects you to have a ‘contact number’. This is about what behaviour a society approves of, and

deems important(Domegan, 2014). Social norms are so strong that one may starve inside his house, but makes efforts to present himself as if s/he is ‘very normal, like everybody else is’.

In the process of socialization, one gets habituated to adhering to the social norms. Habits are stronger than reasons and logic(Kera, 2011). How to overwrite on the undesirable social norms that expect you to be silent about, or not to mention about it in public, allowing this hazardous thing to go on? This is a real challenge. This is the reason behind the current emphasis given by the Government of India for Behavioural Change Communication (BCC) and Inter-Personal Communication (IPC) under Swachh Bharat Mission in India(Government of India, 2014). The Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) campaign has moved away from the run-of-the-mill IEC campaigns. The SBM guideline clarifies that how effective our IEC tools can be, depends on our understanding of the behavioural components. IEC materials per se don’t do any magic. Making IEC materials eloquent is in our understanding of the cultural context in which we work, and social norms that govern social behaviour. The sanitation marketers at the grassroots level are being trained to offer eloquence to the IEC materials. One National Institute of Rural Development (NIRD) at Hyderabad India, and twenty nine State Institutes of Rural Development (SIRDs) – one in each province of India, are imparting series of training programmes to make the IEC activities effective by injecting behavior change components, and interpersonal communication elements.

A community may adopt norms through a variety of ways. That means to say that social norms can also be enforced formally through local sanctions such as Gram Sabha (Village council) resolution and community approvals. A Panchayat (i.e. constitutionally elected local body) can withhold or deliver services in response to members’ adherence to the officially approved norms. It can effectively control member behaviour through rewards and operant conditioning. This is explicitly outlining and implementing behavioural expectations for social good. The market has been able to cut in a mindset to make people think that everybody else in the society expects me to have a mobile phone(Domegan, 2014). It is almost a social norm I am expected to adhere to.

With regard to phones, the market has devised ways to entice people and has also provided excellent availability and access to a whole range of it. Cell phone technology has demonstrated tremendous impact not only in the way economies and societies work, but also the way

individual households transact and communicate. This answers our question: Why mobile Phone is on the priority of the people, but toilet is not?

When it comes to making toilet-use as a social norm, we need to focus on influencing behaviours while at the same time ‘facilitate the organizing’ required to accelerate the pace. Mission ‘Clean India’ is possible, if only we focus on establishing a social norm that keep buzzing in the ears of the rural people that ‘doing it in the open’ is not socially desirable anymore; and that I must also use a toilet for everyone else is shifting to use one. This is triggering a social norm. IEC activities must be so well-grounded and localized that we should be able to *introduce a swarm of bees in the ears of rural people that keep buzzing until they stop the habit of defecating in the open.*

Language and Communication: Symbolic Elements of Culture

There are symbolic elements in culture. For instance, language is a cultural symbol. Cultural practices breed usage of words, and language. In many of the Indian languages it is a matter of civility one refers to defecating as: ‘going out / going open’. They don’t say: ‘going in or going for a closed place’. It has always been a normal, cultural practice – quite accepted. In Hindi it is ‘*bahar jaana*’; in Marati it is: ‘*bahar jaane*’ or *morevar jaane*’; in Bengali it is ‘*baire jaava*’; in Tamil it is ‘*veliya porathu*’; in Telegu it is: ‘*baitiki povadam*’ or ‘*chambu pattakka povadam*’. All these mean ‘going out / going open’. Language reveals the cultural practices. These expressions are live and they are in use in everyday language. Sanitation culture, especially pertaining to disposal of human excreta has always been in open places or behind the bush or on the bunds of tanks and canals. Rural people have always been ‘going away from home’ to do it. That means terms that are closely associated with ‘the culture of insanitation’ are still in use in rural areas. This requires wiping out. We need to focus on the language because language shapes the mindset to take something seriously or to adopt a ‘take-it-easy policy’.

Our educational and communication efforts need to focus on wiping out the very terminologies that refer to open defecation, which eventually shall expunge the practice of open defecation. Wiping off terms pertaining to open defecation means muting the thought associated with it - thus turning down the practice of open defecation or making the practice of open defecation deaden. Therefore, efforts to cross out such ‘terms’ as the ones mentioned above, can also play a vital role in changing perceptions, and gaining new world views. This in a way is providing a

new perspective, which some sociologists call: ‘reframing’. Language and exposure strengthens or weakens cultural practices. Culture distinguishes man from non-man. Taking care of the language can take of the thought, perception, and mental orientation. Introducing cultural artifacts or cultural symbols where expression of such terms is frowned upon, or laughed at, can be one of the forces that drive community towards sanitation culture(Brenton, 2005).

Our purpose of IEC (Information, Education, Communication), especially in the sanitation sector is behavioral change – change in favour of constructing and using toilets; and the rest shall follow. When we find half of India’s population still defecates in the open, we tend to ask ourselves if we are mechanically lining up our IEC tools - one after the other or one over the other - without paying sufficient attention on the behavioural change dimension. If we did that, for sure, it tends to render our IEC activities hallow, ineffective and unproductive. A village located close to urban centres tends to develop different values and norms from one located in remote places. Development practitioners need to connect themselves to the context; design messages that are grounded; and deliver messages that result in desired behaviour and social change. A communicator, when s/he communicates about sanitation, must be able to make out and take in what’s going on inside the mind of a villager; a communicator needs to know if s/he is making progress or is being viewed like a record stuck in a scratched groove, playing the same tired refrain over and over again(Robins, 1986).

Three simple questions, with not so easy answers

Have we ever tried writing down ‘10 convincing reasons’ (earthly reasons that nobody can punch a hole against!) to each of the following questions? Do not give any worldly reasons or sophisticated justifications. Be rational, reasonable and grounded to the rural reality. Write down 10 reasons that directly connect to a rural villager you are talking to - about sanitation. They say: *If you get a big-enough why, you can always figure out the how.* Here are the questions.

1. Tell me why do you think I should construct and use a toilet?
2. Tell me why do you think children should be trained to develop habits that are hygienic?
3. Tell me why do you think I should wash hands with soap during critical times?

We need to do this homework because they [rural people] have one thousand reasons (which have become almost metaphors by now) why they do not need a toilet. Some of their reasons are:

- *But I have been 'doing it in the open' for years,*
- *Most of us don't use toilet, are we all in the hospital, day in and day out, week after week?*
- *Shame?...everybody does that.. I'm not the only one doing it. What shame are you talking about?*
- *We don't have money; the subsidy is too small*
- *But you give subsidy later. Do you think I have the money to invest so that I get your subsidy later?*
- *The space we have is too small to accommodate a toilet.*
- *The sanitary complex is not at easy access from my house.*
- *I may lose my daily wage for at least a week, constructing this unwanted thing.*
- *You are right, but I DON'T WANT IT.*
- *Oh, maybe, you have been given some target to accomplish.*

It's a question of what one attaches importance to, and the difference in the perceptions of the rural people and the development workers. The bottom line in the reasoning of rural villagers is: I don't attach importance to what you refer to – toilet or hand-washing with soap. I don't attach any value to sanitation because I am habituated to doing it in the open, which is almost part of my true-self. I have never felt ashamed of it because I know I am not the only one doing it in the open. This is 'widespread mass opinion'. Talking about communicating to the masses, the word 'mass' comes with several interesting definitions in the Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary (Hornby, 2010). It gives an idea, who we are trying to communicate with when we say 'communicating sanitation to the rural masses'. We are set out communicating with 'the rural masses' - not a few progressive farmers, who are generally fast adopters; not the people infected by HIV-AIDS, who actually want to live longer than they are told they shall.

Resistance to Change

One daunting question among the development professionals working in the sanitation sector is: *(Enough) awareness has been created in order to make them realise this undesirable open*

defecation practice – WHY DON'T THEY CHANGE? Unable to find an answer to this question, they end up dismissing the question as 'resistance to change'. They tend to think that rural people generally are hesitant about any new initiative; and are unchanging; or unwilling to change their old ways of doing things. The magic wand we discovered and put to use in India as an easy solution is – I E C (Information, Education, Communication), and to carry it on business as usual. The fact of the matter about IECs is that they have ended up creating awareness and knowledge, but did not trigger action to the extent desired; as much as they have failed to understand human behaviour and the reasons behind resistance to change.

Understanding Resistance to Change

The reason why people don't change could be because they are afraid of accepting responsibility. They lack the desire to change; they lack the will to accept the need for change. It simply means we are trying to install new habits in their character; and break the habits they lived with for over 25 – 30 years (Kera, 2011). Most of our behaviour is habitual - for instance - nodding the head up and down means 'yes' in India but 'no' in Turkey (Abraham, 2006). Try changing it. You shall understand how difficult it is. Similarly, how often we hear from our colleagues: *'I want to give up smoking, but I am unable to'*. The implication of the statement is: *I am aware of all the reasons why I should give up smoking, but still this habit overpowers me*. Their mind is so conditioned and closed that they are not ready to take in any new idea, or simply they are not ready to listen at all. There are several (negative) auto-suggestions working in people's minds to offer justification for why they don't care – be it using a toilet or hand washing with soap. Habits render one powerless from making right decisions. They choose to listen to their autosuggestions and go by them.

The Source of 'Resistance to Change'

To understand 'the source of resistance to change', it is necessary to understand a simple truth about what runs in his/her mind when a rural villager listens to our communication on the importance of sanitation. We are aware that the conscious mind of humans can think. The subconscious mind is not rational/ it acquires a world view and holds it for ready reference. Subconscious mind is the databank that feeds information to the conscious mind to respond.

When listening to you, his conscious mind keeps constantly interacting with his subconscious mind with reference to his autosuggestions. The reference he has in his subconscious mind about sanitation practices is negative (i.e. *I don't need; I have been like this for years; I am poor; the subsidy may not come in full; there is enough open place available etc.*). He is partly listening to you, while internally talking to himself, justifying to himself why he does not need a toilet. Subconscious mind is not rational /it's not chosen. It is unconsciously acquired during the course of life. It is getting habituated and to direct one to behave in a manner s/he has always been behaving. As s/he grows in age, it gets stronger and becomes rock solid (as 'engraved reference points' at subconscious mind). Thus goes the saying: 'habits die hard'. Habits are a lot stronger than logic and reasons.

Even at times, when his conscious mind wakes up to say: '*yes, I agree with you*', his subconscious mind quickly brings in a justification to satisfy why s/he should choose to say '*no*'. His conscious mind may persistently come up with excellent reasons, but his subconscious mind keeps coming up with even more compelling counter-reasons(Kera, 2011). That's why when we try to convince such people (especially older people) we often feel like talking to a brick wall. That's the reason it is said: 'catch them young while they are still at school'. The challenge in rural sanitation is how to make a villager to consider and ponder over the truth in what you explain about sanitation. How to break his resistance, pushing him to reweigh habits that s/he has lived with for years?

How to deal with resistance?

There are two things to bear in mind here. One way of looking at it is there is no such thing as resistance. There are only inflexible communicators who push at the wrong time and in the wrong direction; and the second thing to remember is 'habits are stronger than reasons and logic'. Habits are hard and they have got engraved as mental-orientation of a person over the years. As you communicate to them, your soft messages are taken to their existing mental-orientation for an appraisal. Chances of bouncing off are high unless your message is flexible-enough for consideration and locally grounded that can stand resolutely at appraisal stage without bouncing back immediately. Most of us think communicating is akin to verbal boxing, where you should win the community groups. A good communicator, instead of opposing

someone's views, is flexible and resourceful enough to sense the creation of resistance, finds points of argument, align himself with them, and then redirect communication in a way s/he wants to go. *The superior fighter succeeds without violence*(Robins, 1986). This is called intelligent non-aggressiveness. This very much connects with our Swachh Bharat Mission's idea of presenting the Mahatma as a brand for a big-enough cause.

No resistant people, Only Inflexible Communicators

It is important for us to remember that certain words and phrases create resistance and problems. Good communicators realise this and pay close attention to the words they use and the effect they have on the participants group. The point is: there are no resistant people, only inflexible communicators. Just as there are words and phrases that automatically trigger feelings or states of resistance, there are also ways to communicate that keep people involved and open. The skill required is communicate exactly how you felt about the issue in question, without compromising your integrity in anyway, and yet you never had to disagree with the person, either? It's called agreement frame. In any communication to respect the person you are communicating with, maintain rapport with him, share with him what you feel is true and right, and yet never resist his opinion in any way. Without resistance there is no conflict(Robins, 1986). When you respect, and agree there is no way for conflict. You're building rapport by entering the other person's world and acknowledging his communication rather than ignoring or denigrating it with words like 'but' or 'however' or 'no' or 'you simply don't understand' etc.

You are creating a frame of agreement that bonds you together. And you're opening the door to redirecting something without creating resistance. By disagreeing, you are going to intensify the resistance, however sensible the point you make might be. Remaining in rapport is important rather than rushing to drive a point forcefully. Notice, you don't have to agree with the content of the person's communication. You can always appreciate, respect or agree with someone's feelings (world view) about something.

You can appreciate his feelings because if you had lived in the same context, you would have, perhaps, developed the same perception, who knows? When you communicate in this way, the other person feels respected. He feels heard, and has no fight. There is no disagreement, yet new

possibilities are also simultaneously introduced for him to consider. There is a Murphy's Law (Bloch, 2002) which goes like this: *'If you can't convince, confuse'*. The response to your communication is 'confusion'. Confusion is one of the ways to interrupt patterns / behaviour. People fall into certain habits or patterns because it is their way of using their resources in the best way they know. It's not easy to convince them, but providing them with several perspectives to ponder over, it is possible to confuse them. Confusion makes people feel uncomfortable. Now that you have given different perspectives to him, let him ponder over. S/he is not in the same 'resistant state' where you found him before. S/he is 'confused'. That's another level. That's good enough in the direction of behaviour change. And that's the first step to make them buy a new idea.

In face-to-face communication (during door-to-door campaigns) family-specific and person-specific communication may have to be designed rather than walking as if a message-sprayer has been tied to your mouth. Self-critical analysis can help. Self-critical monitoring is very essential in communication. Critical review of practice is vital to enrich development practice. Without criticality, the experiences of your development practice shall not contribute to the existing knowledge in, and theories of rural development. Development communication must stay to create the desired impact.

Perception & Negativity

Many communication challenges arise because of differing perceptions (French, 1996). The first requirement to stand firmly as a good communicator is not to register a 'negative image' of the poor and criticize them as traditional, old-fashioned and unchanging. Do not get disheartened either. Maybe, they have misplaced priorities. Your perception of things is different from theirs. Your mental orientation is different from theirs. They have been socialized in a different environment - in an environment where defecating in the open is 'absolutely normal'.

The process by which we influence each other's perception through communication and negotiation is in our ability to understand a given society. How we feel about something and what we do about it are dependent upon our perception of it. Many times, by enabling people change these habitual patterns, we can help them create greater choices for them. This is called reframing (Marshall, 2007; Brenton, 2005). Our approach to reframing and how we facilitate

perceptual alignment matters(Robins, 1986). Each one in this world guards a gate of change that can be opened only from the inside.

The point is you can reach your outcome more efficiently by gently aligning and then leading rather than by pushing violently. Most of us tend to go to a sanitation campaign holding a view that that we are right, and they [the villagers] are wrong. That simply means one side has a monopoly on truth, and the other resides in utter darkness. This must be avoided. Learn to listen with open mind; you shall notice your perspective expand. Try to understand the mental block, and what causes it. Address it with appropriate behavioural influence tactics.

Second way to solve problems is to redefine them – to find a way to agree rather than to disagree. We've all found ourselves in stuck states, in which we recycle our own mental dirty dishwasher. We are used to constantly making statements like: '*poor sanitation causes a variety of diseases*', and we keep repeating it over and over wherever we go. It's like a record stuck in a scratched groove, playing the same tired refrain over and over again. The way to get the record unstuck is to give the needle a nudge or pick it up and put in somewhere else. The way to change a stuck state is the same way: we need to interrupt the pattern – the tired old refrain – and start anew(Robins, 1986). Maybe, we can talk about privacy, comfort, dignity, civility, and so on. This is exactly we are trying to do through Swachh Bharat Mission by making it a people's movement.

Conclusion

To conclude I would like to repeat a statement I made at the beginning of this article. Find ways to introduce a swarm of bees in the ears of rural people that keep buzzing until they stop the habit of defecating in the open. We need to keep working on amplifying 'the bee buzz'. Innovating ways to amplifying the buzzer is a significant task to all sanitation marketers. We are set out to work with mind-sets – of others and our own as well. We need to do a lot of homework, bearing in mind the context and the mental orientation of the people. In words of Stephen R Covey: 'try to understand before being understood' (Covey, 2011). A flexible communicator shall play cool with the resistant community. S/he shall be able to break the

mental conditioning much easier than an inflexible communicator with a set of 'done-to-death IEC materials'.

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