

SHGs gearing to make Kovalam a model panchayat

Leadership training with a blend of engineering, community management and environment innovation has united the people and members of Self Help Groups (SHGs) in Kovalam panchayat near Chennai towards initiatives that would make their panchayat a role model.

Kamatchi is the President of a Panchayat Level Federation (PLF) of around 85 Self Help Groups (SHG) formed by the state government and representing over 1300 women members from Kovalam Panchayat. A school dropout and mother of two, she is negotiating with the management of a star hotel located in Kovalam beach to employ the members of her SHGs as casual workers in the hotel during banquets.



SHG members at Kovalam

Kamatchi is one of the fifty trainees who were part of a three-month leadership training programme conducted by the Institute of Buddhist Economics, Komazawa University (IBEKU), Japan with support from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA).

Kovalam village is situated on the East Coast Road near Chennai in Tamil Nadu. Its scenic beauty and pristine beach, a boating club and proximity to Chennai city attract a number of tourists. For years, efforts have been made to capitalise upon this opportunity and make Kovalam a flourishing tourist industry but these have been in vain.

Home to over 6000 people, Kovalam comprises nine geographic divisions based upon caste and religion. The post-tsunami relief assistance from different agencies have created a tendency among the community to look at outside support and help.

“One thing that holds up the development of Kovalam, is the division of our people based upon cast and religion. Due to this, people do not join hands and work together to develop the village the way they want to, for instance – there is a significant lack of water in village, the village is not clean and it does not have toilets. People want to solve the problems but they are unable to come together to solve it”, says Dave Bockman, Community Development Expert who had been working with Kovalam people for past five years.

The project “Self-Help and Leadership Training” aimed to address and resolve these issues. Community mobilisation, training of youngsters and women to be leaders and creating engineering innovations to attain total sanitation were the key aspects of the project.

Being leaders

The formal classroom trainings and exposure visits has created a milieu and induced the women and youth groups to work together to improve the community and raise its economic profile. Participants from different parts of Kovalam come together, overcoming barriers of caste and religion. It is heartening to see the flexibility, maturity and energy among the women leaders and it is easy to believe that they will one day unite the village. Dhan Foundation, an organisation based in Madurai led the training process.

Sathyavathi, a ward member in Kovalam panchayat who was also a participant of the three month training programme and the exposure visits to different panchayats in Kerala, says that the training has helped her understand the panchayat system, as well as the provisions and entitlements under different schemes and this aids her in formulating and presenting cases easily to the authorities with greater confidence.

“In the beginning we were not allowed to come out of our homes, but looking at examples of other women and after attending the training, we now actively participate in the activities of the SHG and also run our own businesses from the microcredit that we obtained through it” says Haseena, a member of Kaja SHG.

Model panchyat

The SHG members have now joined hands to clean up the village through the Kovalam Rotary Community Corps (KRCC), a platform supported by Rotary Club of Chennai that aims to galvanise communities to carry out projects for their own development. The trained leaders and SHG members leverage the KRCC to initiate and implement development projects to make Kovalam a model panchayat.



KRCC members involved in cleaning Kovalam

Currently KRCC is busy with the “Clean Kovalam” campaign, where they aspire to clean the public spaces in Kovalam and enhance the public market space. Rotary Club of Chennai has committed to support the corps for next three years to make Kovalam village a clean and tourist-friendly place.

“I would be thrilled to see the RCC take up independent responsibilities, not as a political group, but as a platform where community issues can be discussed and a few ideas can be actually implemented by their own resources and efforts. We hope to instil in them a level of self-confidence, so that they can see for themselves that they can do several other projects”, says Mr. Velu Muthu of Rotary Club.

While working to create new leaders, the project also tried to address a critical concern of the women and Dalits in Kovalam – the issue of water and sanitation. Ninety percent of the households in the Dalit hamlets did not have access to toilets of any kind – which means almost all the people practice open defecation, which is a major threat to public hygiene.

Mahatma Gandhi perceived sanitation to be more important than political independence. "The cause of many of our diseases is the condition of our lavatories and our bad habit of disposing of excreta anywhere and everywhere. I, therefore, believe in the absolute necessity of a clean place for answering the call of nature and clean articles for use at the time, have accustomed myself to them and wish that all others should do the same," He is known to have said.

Three years back, people in Nadu colony in Kovalam village were defecating in the open; today the scenario has completely changed. Nadu colony now has become hygienic and eco-friendly with construction of 45 eco-san toilets through JICA-IBEKU. This aspect of the project not only aimed for total sanitation, but also towards more innovative inexpensive and environment-friendly solutions.



Eco-San toilet- Outside of Eco-San toilet constructed with reinforced bamboo concrete (visible at the yellow paint)

Bhavani, a resident of Nadu colony says, "Before we built eco-san toilets, we would spend at least 15 minutes to go out to defecate in bushes, now apart from saving time, it's safer and convenient. We no longer fear for snakes, scorpions or lecherous men in the bushes."

Since Kovalam is on the shore of Bay of Bengal, the ground water level is too high during high tide and monsoon seasons; this makes it practically impossible to use normal flush toilets. To resolve this, dry toilets or eco-san toilets that do not require water were introduced. To reduce the construction cost, the Japanese project team tried and succeeded in using bamboo reinforced concrete, instead of the normal concrete to build the wall.

The idea of using a toilet - especially a toilet without water - was initially not accepted by the people of Nadu colony, it was difficult to convince them. However, people began to accept the idea when they started using the toilets.

Benzitta, another resident of Nadu colony shares, "In the beginning, I was not convinced. I consulted my neighbours, who constructed the eco-san toilets, and I myself surveyed many installations, only then did I go for the eco-san toilet. Now I am happy with my decision"

How Eco-San works

These "Eco-San" toilets are constructed with two vaults above the ground. A specially installed squatting pan diverts the urine out of the unit where it is drained into a small plant

bed. The faeces are “deposited” into one of the vaults; after each use the faeces are covered with a cupful of ash. The first vault is used for about six months or until it is three-quarters full; it is then sealed and the second vault used. As the second vault is in use, the faeces in the first vault decompose. The decomposition process reduces the faeces in volume and kills all dangerous pathogens. At the end of the cycle, the decomposed faeces are removed for use in ornamental gardens as a soil amendment or it may be simply burnt.



Ash used to cover the faeces.

Urine is pathogen free while rich in phosphate and nitrogen; it can be safely used on all crops as a substitute for expensive commercial fertilizers. Thus in farm communities it is collected and used in fields while in non-farm communities the urine is drained into flower beds or beneath a banana tree.

“The normal flush toilets needs more water and here we don’t have much water. But in this eco-san toilet, just add ash and cover – it’s simple and hygienic”, adds Bhavani.

Kundrakadu, another village in Kovalam panchayat that is very close to the notable star hotel, is facing a huge crisis of public hygiene. Of 88 households in Kundrakadu, only 17 are equipped with toilets. The houses in this village are close to each other and there is no vacant space to construct toilets. So, the youngsters of the village, have now joined hands together to initiate and build community eco-san toilets in their village, where they are also planning to sell the compost manure to the beach resort. If this business plan works out, then the users may also be paid to squat.

Mr. Janakiraman, President of Kovalam panchayat is in full support of using dry toilets; he is looking at options to build eco-san toilets at panchayat level. Also he is in touch with a central bank to get loans for households to build toilets.

Similarly, Pungeri, a clean and calm village near the Vandalur-OMR road is planning to go the Nadu colony way. Not many households in Pungeri are equipped with a toilet. A few open toilets constructed by the Government are either abandoned or not in use. Some households have constructed the eco-san toilets with support from Japanese friends, and seeing this, others in the village are also planning to construct similar dry toilets.

Now that the young leaders and women are united together with high confidence are seeing a bright future. With a little more direction and support they would make Kovalam a model panchayat.