

Confessions of an OD boy¹

It is always nice to be in my ancestral village, a small hamlet not very far from the foothills of Western Ghats in TamilNadu. The things that I love the most about my village are the temples on the bank of my village pond, view of far off mountains from the terrace of my ancestral house and the eggplant curry my aunt makes for me whenever I am there. I go there at least once a year to attend the annual ritual in my family temple. There are not less than 40 to 50 people in my ancestral house at that point in time. On such occasions everything becomes a group activity, be it prayer, cooking, eating, bathing and even “defecating”. It starts when the day lights starts fading and we men go out in a group (around 10- 15 males) comprising grand uncles, uncles, cousins and nephews. The dress code is mostly our traditional dhoti or lungi. As we start walking we talk about our day today life in the place of work or in the different cities where we make a living as this in the only time in the year we see some of our kin. The walk would be interrupted upon coming across some known face in the village and then proceeds after exchanging salutations, pleasantries and blah blahblah. Thus we cover about a kilometre or two. The talk during walk is always funny or about some serious management issues regarding our temple. The defecating venue is usually near the pond or in some farm along the road side. The location is decided upon thorough a quick consensus. Last year we happen to go our farm - only to defecate - where I have never been before and my father started narrating his childhood memories of running around in the farm and that it was a gift to my grandmother from her elder brother and so on. So to me it was like marking the territories with urine and faeces like the big cats “This is my territory” or more like getting connected to your ancestral grounds!!!. Nice way of getting connected. The moment we enter the arena a shroud of silence falls over and the group disperses quietly to sit behind a bush or find a “clean” slot. Nobody shouts “Group halt and Group disperse”.

It is not inconvenient - I really like it - to defecate in a farm, where you burrow the ground at least half a feet with your feet and sit there relaxed enjoying the nature around with a feeling that “All the world’s a toilet”. Nothing on earth can give you this experience when you sit in a smelly enclosed toilet cubicle to defecate in your city apartment! Ten minutes pass, twenty minutes pass and there is no sign of movement behind the bushes. It seems as if nobody wants to leave the place or has been waiting for someone to get up first. There is no rush for a photo finish here. Suddenly a head pops up from behind a bush and within a minute the whole group reassembles. Within that short span of a minute we all somehow manage to find a stone or a leaf in our own private bush territory and wipe the bottom clean. In my case I do it multiple times to make sure that not a speck sticks to my bottom. It becomes some sort of cleaning obsession for a minute

The whole thing becomes unpleasant and nauseating if the venue is the usual daily defecating ground of the village folk next to the village pond, a place which is also notorious for thorny bushes. There are faeces all around and one has to take extreme care not to step on the small, smelly, fresh heaps of faeces and thorns lying all around. One has to put in the best efforts, with a greater coordination of all the five senses working together so as to find a clean spot. As it is dusk the eyes have to be wide open and vision sharp enough to see what is on ground and what is around, simultaneously cover the nose with towel and frantically search for a clean space which is relatively free of fresh faeces within a two meter diameter. Once you lock the attack area, then the attack position becomes important. You should spread the legs wide enough so that the faeces does not touch your feet as the quantum keeps

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increasing. Equally important is the ground clearance between your bottom and the ground so that mounting heap does not hit your bottom. One needs to have a clear geometric perspective of horizontal and vertical axis in this case. Once you have successfully downloaded the next hunt for a clean stone starts. Imagine sitting in the position and hovering around for a stone. It is a delicate act of balancing being in an unstable equilibrium. Woof, all this effort just for not stepping on faeces, not worth it Man!

Then starts the walk towards the pond or to a stagnant pool of water, which is usually from a leaky air valve of a huge water supply pipe running through my village. The walk after defecation is a fine act of acrobatic balancing, at least for me. The underwear is usually clasped in the palms or dangling from the shoulders as it cannot be worn before washing the bottom. I take utmost care so that my dress does not touch the bottom. As we get nearer and nearer to the water I start feeling uncomfortable. Though I am from a culture which frowns upon the use of paper and uses water and hand to do the ablution it is highly uncomfortable to share a pit of water with so many people.

The worse thing is to do the ablution in the pond and take bath there immediately. Some of them even combine them as a single activity. How awkward it is when you are bathing in the water neck deep and someone is cleaning his bottom in the same waters, barely a few meters from you. I swear, it is the most disgusting feeling one would ever have in his life. I started thinking about the rate of spreading, concentration etc etc. The engineer in me started making calculations at astronomical speed and I dashed out of the water. My brethren from my village were enjoying their cool bath. It was only me who was making a fuss out of a thing which is a day to day occurrence that does not even worth counting as an activity in a broader sense. Frankly speaking do we write it as a task to be accomplished every morning and /or every evening , execute it and then tick it off from our daily do list. It is a sort of involuntary activity that happens automatically at an appointed time most of the days.

To my brethren ignorance is bliss. I neither have the guts nor patience to device a way out to box them inside a toilet. A toilet is still considered unclean to be a part of the house. My ancestral house has got one but it is separate from the house like a small outhouse and is rarely used and that too only by the females of the household. The men folk always prefer the farm or the pond as it's not only defecating but also a social activity as the defecating ground serves as a place of informal social gathering and as a medium of information exchange. Once when I asked one of my cousin to pass on a message to another cousin of mine, she told me that she would inform her when they go out together in the dark as it is the usual practice for ladies to defecate under the cover of darkness. The talk of OD free villages becomes meaning less if these social dynamics are not thought off and addressed through appropriate measures.

The only massive change in social behaviour that I have noticed in my life time so far is the change in the evening habits of village folk after the television started making in roads into the villages. As a child I have seen families in the village sit on the threshold of their houses after dinner and start talking with their neighbours, a perfect place and setting for the village gossips. This started disappearing slowly as people got hooked on to television. This phenomenon resurfaces only during long power cuts in the evenings these days. Such a strong social undercurrent also exists with Open defecation, which has to be gauged and addressed to achieve a meaningful and sustainable OD free intervention.

“Think buddies, think hard, Think out of the box to make people defecate inside the box (toilet)”