

# **Social and Cultural Aspects of Eco-Sanitation**

**A closer look at the Indian context**

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**Note:** Many terms and concepts used in this presentation are already explained in Module 3-3 Ecosan and Human dignity. If you have not studied this module, it is strongly advised that you have a look at it before you continue with this module

## Surveying the Indian scene

- ❖ India faces – as some other development countries – more problems that inhibit the fast implementation of sustainable sanitation systems. Among them are:
- ❖ **Fast Population growth**, which makes it difficult to keep the building of new sanitary infrastructure apace with the rising numbers of people.
- ❖ Through the rigid Indian **Caste system**, a certain social stratum, i.e. the Dalits (or Untouchables) are forced to such inhumane jobs as cleaning (dry) latrines with nothing else but their bare hands. As the higher castes do not have to deal with the disposal and reuse of human excreta, and as they can as well rely on the Dalits to deal with this issue, they do not necessarily want to change the system.
- ❖ **Social-cultural stigmas**: Very strong stigmata are attached to those dealing with human excreta – as the term “untouchables” implies. As well, the Indian society and Hinduism is generally not phaecophilic.
- ❖ On the other hand, the environmental impacts of the present practices are huge: polluted water sources, diseases, eutrophication, as well as land degradation are just some of them. “Indian rivers are dead today. Investments of millions of rupees on sewerage and sewage treatment plants have literally failed to breathe a fresh lease of life into our polluted waterbodies”, is stated on the webpage of the CSE (Centre for Science and Environment, a environmental NGO based in Delhi, India).

## Surveying the Indian scene

- But also Modernization/Globalization are claiming their toll, and adding to the pollution of water sources.
- Moreover, infrastructure is often inadequate. Even in the year 2000, only a total of 31% of the Indian population had access to improved sanitation (1) – which means, that a large part was using either dry latrines, or defecating in the open. Moreover, if there is access to sanitation (78% of the urban population had access to improved sanitation in 2000) (1), only a very small percentage of sewage gets treated. An Article in the Hindustan Times (10th of August 2002) states that: Though Delhi generates nearly 3,000 million litres of sewage per day, according to a Centre for Science and Environment report, "around 1,800 million litres of untreated domestic waste and another 300 million litres of industrial waste end up in the river Yamuna daily."

# Major Social Problem

- ❖ Dalits, and the issue of Untouchability are major social problems in India. As they are intrinsically related to sanitation, human dignity and Dalits must be addressed if further talking about sanitation. Other aspects include:
  - ❖ Human dignity issue needs to be addressed
  - ❖ Dalit identity
  - ❖ Their place in society
  - ❖ Access to basic necessities - clean water and proper sanitation
  - ❖ Ecosan is a potential bridge builder between these communities and the “mainstream”, as those systems do not rely on manual scavengers any more, and can additionally turn waste into a useful and valuable resource. Additionally, other benefits resulting from Ecosan, such as health benefits, will further increase their esteem.







## An Economic Issue



- The poor are the ones who suffer both because of their own “sins” and the “sins” of others. Not only do they face the pollution of their own defecation, but often have to live beside water bodies that have been released from urban sewers. Access to clean water and proper sanitation is therefore a necessary precursor to development. Lack of clean water and adequate sanitation contribute to people remaining in the poverty trap. Some 1.1 billion people – one sixth of the world’s population – do not have access to safe water and 2,4 billion lack basic sanitation.
- Water and sanitation are major factors in the health status of populations. Conventional toilets have been guilty of converting massive quantities of clean water into ‘blackwater’. In developing countries 90 % of this sewage is flushed into surface waters, polluting rivers, lakes and coastal areas. This has contributed to the spread of disease mainly amongst the poor.
- A basic issue in poverty is that of identity and dignity. The poor often lack identity as humans, and therefore lose their dignity. Water and sanitation are factors that highlight this indignity even more. While the rich can be identified with their bottles of mineral water, the poor must be content with polluted water from any source, mostly contaminated by the rich.

## An Economic Issue

- Most houses will have no direct
- water supply. Women have to line up for a bucket
- full of water. Present unsheltered defaecation options leave women exposed with a sense of shame
- Poverty in India is also a caste issue. The lower the caste, generally, the poorer. Hence these are confined to undignified jobs like handling the sewage of the rich; even drinking their wastewater. “Night-soil” or sewage carrying was the job of the lowest caste condemned to such occupations.
- Women’s role in decision-making in all ecological sanitation projects must be increased. Women should be shown to be equal partners with men in the community. Further, involving both women and men in ecological sanitation initiatives can increase project effectiveness. This is mainly because women normally take on more social responsibility than men. Men tend not to be committed to such initiatives.
- Water, health, sanitation, agricultural and nutritional aspects have to be integrated. Ecological sanitation propagates recycling principles in a very powerful way. The implementation of a material-flow-oriented recycling process as a holistic alternative to conventional solutions is the key to such practices. The poor, as well as the rich, will be able to observe the wider ecological issues as they focus attention on this basic problem.





## The larger issue is “justice”

- **Exploitation of the poor by the rich:** As mentioned, the poor suffer from a double burden: They usually pay taxes, but are not connected to centralised and reliable water supply. Moreover, their water sources are polluted by the centralised and untreated sewage of the rich.
- The gap between legislation and implementation at grass roots
- **Political vote banks:** The poor make up for a large part of the voters in India. Mostly, their votes can easily be bought by a sanitation or water supply or sanitation project which is effective in the short run. However, most of these unsustainable and narrow-minded projects will fail inevitably after a certain time. In that way votes can be “bought” again for the next elections, when another short-sighted programme will be launched. The votes that the political leader will get out of these project will usually be sufficient for him/her to get elected. Without these cheaply “bought” votes of the poor, many politicians would not be elected.
- And hence, there is a tacit acceptance that **the poor must continue to be poor** – not only for that reason, because the better-off parts of society are also afraid to lose their status if the poor are not poor any more.



## Ecosan and Social Problems





## **Ecosan and Social Problems**

- **Ecosan must address these socio-cultural issues in order to become acceptable**
- **Whether “users” of toilets or “handlers’ the basic issues for the poor relate to “identity” and “dignity”**
- **Women suffer most, therefore, the woman’s role in decision making of ecosan projects is a must.**

## Proactive Steps

- Something repulsive can become a rich resource that can change our environment
- A menial task of a few individuals or groups becomes management of resources for the whole community. Moreover, due to this sustainable resource management, the whole community can profit: They experience not only fewer health problems, but food security can also be enhanced, as the treated excreta can be used as a fertilizer. This could for instance also be done in a joint effort, and produce could be sold cooperative-like.
- Economic aspects of eco-sanitation can help to change the status, even of scavengers. A ecosan project in the Rajendranagar Slum area of Bangalore has shown that the family occupied with running and maintaining the toilet centre can actually live respectably from this occupation.
- Hence, a **strategic** paradigm shift will need to be planned by ecosan enthusiasts.
- Education is the urgent need: Education should be commenced at a very early stage, and should continue to be taught in school and university curricula.
- Moreover, mass awareness programmes and models and success stories to convince a larger and larger number of people are necessary. This must be supported by mass awareness programmes at all levels.





## **Some Cautions!**

- **Ecosan solutions must not ignore social and cultural factors**
- **Ecosan must not give the impression that everything hi-tech is wrong**
- **Ecosan solutions must not increase the divide between the rich and the poor**
- **Ecosan must avoid the impression that it is the West telling the developing world what they must do!**
- **Danger of 'new Colonialism'!**

## **But, lets look the advantages**

- Low cost options for the poor are available
- Eco-friendly options for the rich
- Nutrient recovery which can enrich the rural areas and empower the poor economically
- Enhanced food production and sustainability
- Restoration of dignity and identity
- Long term poverty alleviation

**....and therefore socially upward mobility**





## *The most sustainable solution!*

- Ecosan has the potential of considering all aspects of life and thus takes into account the complete interrelatedness of life.
- Potential to address social, cultural, economic, environmental as well as basic human issues

**Ecosan must contribute to be better future for the world!**



■ So lets work together!

## References

- (1) WATER SUPPLY AND SANITATION. In: Making Water Flow for All. World Water Council, Japan Water Resources Association, United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (Ed.), 2003: 96-113.  
*URL:*[http://www.worldwatercouncil.org/download/WWA%20ch07%20Supply\\_sanitation.pdf](http://www.worldwatercouncil.org/download/WWA%20ch07%20Supply_sanitation.pdf) (As of 19.01.2005)