

Transgender led operation and management of septage treatment plant (SeTP) in Cuttack Municipal Corporation, Odisha, India

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Figure 1 – Source: HUDD

Summary

Cuttack is the second most populous city in the eastern Indian state of Odisha with an estimated population of 763,000 in 2022, including outgrowth areas. Due to the city's location flanked by two rivers, widespread urban settlement, high floating population needing medical treatment and geographic location, Cuttack has been facing unique challenges in sanitation. Urban flooding, open defecation, lack of adequate space and partial sewerage coverage were among the major challenges that hampered the achievement of safe sanitation solutions. Moreover, due to the absence of a complete underground sewer system and faecal sludge treatment facilities, discharge of faecal sludge into the open environment and the resultant contamination of ground and surface water was a serious problem.

To mitigate these challenges, the Cuttack Municipal Corporation (CMC) established a Septage Treatment Plant (SeTP) for treatment of wastes generated from toilets with on-site sanitation

systems. However, management of treatment facilities proved to be a challenge due to lack of skilled and economical human resource in the area.

It was then that the CMC decided to also include the transgender community considering their vulnerability and lack of sustainable and dignified livelihood opportunities. As a result, in a pioneering step towards inclusive and community-led sanitation, the CMC organized a group of transgender individuals in the city into a collective or a Self-Help Group, provided adequate training and entrusted the responsibility of the Operation and Management (O&M) of the SeTP in 2020. This set the ball rolling for engagement of transgender groups, in Cuttack and other cities, across multiple activities in sanitation and water supply in the State.

The city has paved a path for stakeholders both within the country and outside to relook at the potential of transgender communities and narratives of inclusive sanitation. Currently, Odisha State has emerged as a forerunner in inclusive sanitation, wherein Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) across the State are partnering with transgender collectives in Faecal Sludge and Septage Management (FSSM), solid waste management and water supply.

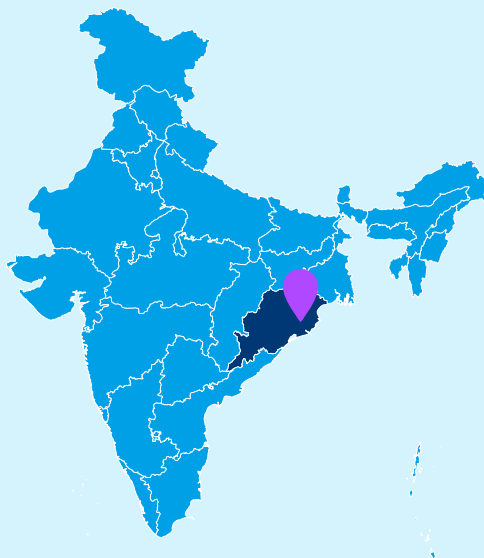
Overview

Geographical information

Country: India

City: Cuttack

City population: 610,189



Problem

- Lack of local skilled human resources with community connection for sustainable operation and management of sanitation infrastructure.
- Marginalization of transgender community members with fewer opportunities for dignified livelihood and mainstreaming through partnership with public entities.
- Mitigate the challenges of wastewater treatment.

Solution

- Implementing a community-led inclusive and sustainable Faecal Sludge and Septage Management (FSSM) model by partnering with transgender for operation and maintenance of Septage Treatment Plant (SeTP).

Problem

To mitigate the challenges of used water and septage management, Cuttack city in India has adopted a combination of both underground sewer network (40% of the population covered) and FSSM. The SeTP became operational in November 2019 and the two Sewage Treatment Plants (STPs) became operational in 2019 and 2022. But Cuttack Municipal Corporation (CMC) was lacking a comprehensive sanitation programme for creation of an enabling environment for community engagement.

Lack of skilled human resources with community connection for sustainable operation and management of sanitation infrastructure was a continuous challenge. The wastewater treatment plants in India, including in Odisha, are traditionally managed by specialized agencies that deploy trained technicians with high operational costs. Moreover, there is also an absence of such specialized agencies in small and mid-level towns of India, including in Odisha. Besides, such agencies lack community connection which in the long run affects the ownership and sustainability of the treatment facilities.

On one hand there was a dearth of local human resources with community connection to engage in operation and maintenance of the sanitation assets; on the other hand, we had the presence of a transgender community in the city. These transgender people have historically been marginalized due to lack of access to sustainable sources of livelihood that treat them with dignity. Most of them resort to sex work or seek alms on trains, at traffic junctions and at toll gates. They face extreme hatred from family and society leading to their exclusion from the mainstream society. Their problems got aggravated during the COVID-19 pandemic when the scope of begging and sex work was severely affected. They were subjected to abject poverty and faced extreme risk of survival.

Solution

The state of Odisha has a strong ecosystem of collectives in both urban and rural areas. Presently, over 350,000 people associated with 3,500 women's self-help groups are trained and engaged in various income and employment generating activities. These collectives have a history of running successful livelihood programmes for over two decades through various departments in the State. However, it was for the first time that the Housing and Urban Development Department (HUDD) – the nodal department of the state for implementing urban sanitation programmes and head of all Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) in the State – decided to partner with the urban collectives across the sanitation value chain in the State.

The HUDD's policy decision to adopt a decentralized, low-technology and cost-effective solution for SeTPs was critical for creating an enabling environment for a community-led operations model. As a result, the transgender members from these community groups took up techno-managerial roles at these plants catering to their operational needs instead of private commercial contractors.

Encouraged by the Department's twin objectives, the CMC decided to organize transgender individuals into collectives as they faced multiple socio-economic challenges. Efforts were made

to identify them who were spotted at traffic junctions across the City where they used to seek alms. Thus, in February 2020, the Bahucharamata transgender group was mobilized, counselled, organized into a formal Self-Help Group and imparted training with the required skill sets for the O&M of the 60-KLD SeTP in the City.

The group underwent three days of classroom training and two-months of field training covering various aspects of plant management, trouble shooting, safety aspects, group management, leadership, financial management and communication skills under the supervision of ULB Municipal Engineers and other experts. Following this, when they were groomed and ready to shoulder the O&M responsibilities of the treatment facility, the plant was transferred through a formal contract agreement signed between the CMC Commissioner and the President of the Bahucharamata group in June 2020. The Bahucharamata group has been successfully managing the SeTP since then. Along with the daily O&M of the plant, the members also keep an eye on the illegal disposal of faecal waste in public place and report to CMC for action.

The CMC's initiative met two key objectives: inclusion and empowerment of the marginalized transgender community through provision of livelihood opportunities and demonstration of a decentralized, sustainable, community-led livelihood model in sanitation. Since then, the ULB has on-boarded several transgender collectives in the management of community toilets and public toilets, solid waste treatment facilities, driving of battery-operated waste segregated vehicles and for creation of awareness among citizens and communities.

This intervention of the city government has resulted in the elevation of the status of the members of transgender community as facility managers with the members getting social recognition. With this, they are now treated as professionals, critical to the city's sanitation ecosystem. Appreciation from various quarters, felicitation and media coverage have also resulted in change in perception of society towards the transgender communities. This has also brought about acceptance and reuniting with their families. Importantly, the intervention has motivated many transgender community members to come forward to partner with governmental departments and explore livelihood opportunities as a step towards mainstreaming.

Through this intervention, the city administration has not only positively redefined the identity and image of transgender community but has also set an example of a successful livelihood and inclusive sanitation model for the State and country. This has been a great leap towards their integration into the mainstream society by providing them with a secured income source with dignity and pride.

The group members say that they are now able to increase their saving by nearly 30%. Most of the transgender collective members are now supporting their family and community members. This intervention has inculcated a feeling of ownership, leadership and professionalism in them where they have shown higher level of managerial and leadership skills in managing the SeTP successfully.

This has created a ripple effect in the transgender community in city and across the state, which is evident from more and more members from the transgender community coming forward to be engaged across liquid and solid waste management in the State. Transgender communities in other cities of Odisha, i.e., Bhubaneswar (capital city), Paralakhemundi (Gajapati district), Purushottampur (Ganjam district) and Nimapada (Puri district), have also been entrusted with

the task of managing SeTPs in their respective cities. Along with this, many ULBs have included them in management of transportation of segregated solid waste and management of solid waste treatment facilities. Recognizing their professionalism and growth, the city has now decided to entrust the responsibility of managing a water treatment plant in Cuttack. This is considered path-breaking as they have progressed from waste related activities (in common parlance, dirty jobs) to managing the drinking water system of the city, a quantum jump in perception and recognition.

This effort by CMC has been recognized at various national and international forums. Cities across the State and country are trying to replicate the Cuttack approach of sustainable and inclusive sanitation through engagement of transgender groups. “It is a matter of great pride for the entire team of HUDD and CMC that a transgender member who was seen seeking alms in the traffic junction in the city two years ago has risen to the level of leading a transgender group and successfully managing the septage treatment facility along with being recognized as a women change maker at the national level,” says Ms Sheetal Bastia, President of the Bahucharamata transgender Self-Help Group and winner of the National India Sanitation Coalition (ISC)-FICCI Sanitation Award in 2021 in the category of “Women Change Maker.”

This initiative not only spotlights the criticality of community engagement for sustainable sanitation and urban development, but also demonstrates that inclusive community partnerships can truly empower vulnerable and marginalized communities like transgender groups.

Lessons learned

The key lessons learned from this intervention are:

- Community groups with adequate technical and managerial training can be effectively on-boarded for sanitation service delivery. This not only creates employment opportunities for the vulnerable groups, but also helps in mainstreaming them by transforming them into skilled professionals.
- Technology adopted in waste management facilities can be simplified and the electrical and mechanical intervention can be minimized to enable engagement of community groups
- Vulnerable groups like transgender communities, rag picker individuals and sanitation workers can be effectively integrated in formal sanitation livelihoods by providing them assured incomes and benefits. Inter-departmental convergence to provide them access to all social welfare benefits is key.
- Gender sensitive trainings/orientation for ULB functionaries is critical to partner with transgender groups.

Useful links

<https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/specials/india-interior/a-rainbow-tinged-sanitation-makeover/article32045425.ece>

<https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/odisha/2020/jun/06/women-shgs-transgenders-to-manage-septage-treatment-plants-in-odisha-2152866.html>

<https://thelogicalindian.com/uplifting/cuttack-based-transgender-shg-bagged-sanitisation-award-31910>

<https://odishanewstune.com/2022/04/13/watco-engages-transgenders-to-manage-water-treatment-plant-in-cuttack/>

Inclusive Sanitation in Odisha: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0-TAUEWUNw8>

Further reading and references

- Service Level Improvement Plan (SLIP): Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) <http://tiny.cc/bsmxuz>

About the authors

G. Mathi Vathanan, Principal Secretary, Housing & Urban Development Department, has been leading some of the flagship urban development missions of Odisha. He has anchored the non-sewered sanitation solution and the 24x7 drink from tap mission in Odisha, two globally acclaimed initiatives in the Water & Sanitation sector that serve as torchbearers for the developing world.

Sandipan Sarangi, Team Lead, FSSM project management unit (PMU). Sandipan has over a decade of experience of leading sanitation projects and has provided technical advisory services to various governmental and non-governmental partner organizations for infrastructure building and streamlining operations.

Elisa Patnaik, Communication & Inclusion Lead, FSSM PMU. Elisa has nearly 18 years of experience in communication, gender and inclusion and has successfully led communication & inclusion interventions across multiple sectors and partners.

About the institution / organisation

Cuttack Municipal Corporation is one of the leading entities of Housing and Urban Development Department, Government of Odisha who spearheaded this initiative in the city of Cuttack. cmccuttack.gov.in



About the IWA Inclusive Urban Sanitation Initiative

IWA's Inclusive Urban Sanitation initiative responds to a huge and growing public need - safe sanitation in combination with access to safe drinking water and hygiene underpins good health. The aim of this initiative is reshaping the global urban sanitation agenda by focusing on inclusive sanitation service goals--and the service systems required to achieve them - rather than the traditional singular focus on expanding sewer networks and treatment works. This forms part of IWA's larger agenda to promote inclusive, resilient, water-wise, and sanitation-secure cities.

About the Inclusive Urban Sanitation Stories

The Inclusive Urban Sanitation stories are documenting some of the policies, practices, and approaches that demonstrate how stakeholders especially those in urban areas (e.g., public sector, operators, academics, regulators, and other key actors) are taking part or contributing to Sustainable Development Goal 6 which require water and sanitation concepts and norms to look beyond technology and the usual focus on building infrastructure. Increased focus is on safety, inclusion, environment, public health, and multiple technology solutions tailored to different geographies and socio-economic contexts for building climate-resilient cities. The stories aim to inspire urban stakeholders to discuss ways for advancing inclusive urban sanitation, especially in low- and middle-income countries.

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