A Sarpanch who won’t Stop at Just Ending open Defecation

**INTRODUCTION**

Sincere efforts of people never go waste, especially if the effort is from a person from within the community and has not just chronological years but also wisdom gained from experience. In the village of K. Rajupalem, located in the Ballikurava Mandal of Prakasam district, Mr Gadde Muralidhar Rao, the Sarpanch of the GP, is one such person. He played a pivotal role in mobilizing the community for the construction of toilets under the Swachh Bharat Mission.

The Gram Panchayat (GP) of K. Rajupalem has a diverse population of 1250 from all castes and classes. Soon after being elected as the Sarpanch of the village, Muralidhar Rao had to attend a Mandal-level meeting on the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) during which the importance of constructing toilets and the role of sanitation were discussed. This led to personal motivation and interest of Rao towards achieving an open defecation free (ODF) village. Another factor that pushed him was the goal to be the first ODF village in the Mandal. Rao takes keen interest in the development activities of the village and has a sound knowledge on sanitation and its importance. After the launch of the Swachh Bharat Mission, there was some amount of awareness generation amongst the population of the village and people were willing to adapt to better sanitation practices.

In this village, 36 Individual Household Latrines (IHHs) were constructed and there was a 100% usage of the same. This GP has been declared as the first “Open Defecation Free” village in the Mandal.
**What worked?**

The supreme motivation of the Sarpanch after the Mandal-level meetings was the most major factor that contributed to make the village ODF. In July 2015, Rao took the help of the Mandal Resource coordinator (MRC) and started a baseline survey in the village to help ascertain the number of households lacking an Individual House-Hold Latrine (IHHL). Despite lack of support and cooperation from the field assistants, Rao did not give up and ensured that he went alone and collected the data over a period of 10 days. His identification led to a finding that out of the 1250 households, 36 households did not have an IHHL. During the baseline survey, Rao interacted with the households and stressed on the importance of a toilet facility on the premises and the importance of safe sanitation procedures.

Owing to the goodwill he holds amongst the people, most of them agreed for construction of a toilet during the stage of baseline survey. With the help of the Panchayat Secretary, he identified the eligibility of the households for incentives under SBM. To ensure that all the households are on board, Rao made a second visit to the 36 households during which it came to his notice that the households did not have the initial money to start the construction of the IHHL. The situation of all the 36 households was the same on an average. This, however, did not deter Rao and he devised a plan in which he contributed to the initial material which was purchased in bulk on a promise that as soon as the government money is sanctioned, it would be returned to him. This was agreeable to all the households and construction started immediately.

Some positive aspects which contributed to the process include the dedication with which Muralidhar Rao took up the work. He ensured the quality and the time for the construction so that there is no delay in the process. In fact, he was physically present at the construction site during the process. He would also sometimes offer water to the construction workers in a show of charming spontaneity and solidarity.

It took two months for the completion of 36 IHHLs. Soon after the completion, Rao’s efforts were recognised by the government officials and the GP was awarded the “Best GP” title in the Mandal on the occasion of Independence Day, 2015. Rao strongly believes that 100% construction is not the final solution to achieving total sanitation; he believes that 100% usage is the main challenge that needs to be addressed to achieve ODF in the village.

To make this a reality, he sought the help of the Mandal and district level officials to generate awareness among the villagers. They used the medium of campaigns, rallies and household interaction to convince people to use the toilets. He motivated them by educating them on the adverse health effects of open defecation. There were still some defaulters who were practising open defecation, who were identified by Rao personally and he convinced them again tirelessly to achieve ODF. His perseverance paid off and finally everyone started using the IHHL. After a thorough verification, the same was intimated to the Mandal and district level officials who verified and declared the village ODF and the first in the Mandal to be ODF.

**Way forward**

The steel will of Rao did not let him stop with achieving ODF. He now started working on waste disposal in the village. He started fundraising for a waste collection vehicle to ensure a clean village. He identified donors and raised up to Rs 25,000 for buying a vehicle and he contributed Rs 5000 towards the maintenance of the worker who collects the waste. Rao also took a lead in approaching the government for other development and sanitation works in the village. This led to some allocated funds released towards the village development works which include the construction of roads, drainages, community dustbins and waste dump-yard. It has also been estimated that in a period of three to six months the expected works would have been completed and there would have been a good solid and liquid waste management system in the village.

This is one example of a single person’s tireless efforts which contributed to achieving ODF in the village and is now on the path to achieving total sanitation. It is a fact to be appreciated that one senior citizen is the reason the village is now on a path to development and will soon achieve all the indicators of the Smart Village Smart Ward.

“I was apprehensive when I started working on achieving ODF status for the GP. But one I achieved that, I got immense confidence and strength to work on other aspects of village development”.

—Mr Gadde Muralidhar Rao
Sarpanch

Sarpanch receiving Best GP Award