Despite being aware of the benefits of Sanitation and the continuous efforts on achieving improved sanitation for all, India has not been able to reach the targets as planned. The Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) has come into play with a new target time for ensuring improved sanitation for all. In the last one and half years of operation of SBM, many Gram Panchayats (GP) have realised to set the target of 100% toilet constructions, and the usage, thereby creating Open defecation Free (ODF) Villages and Vanjangipeta GP is one of them.

A Vanjangipeta GP in Amadalavalsa Mandal of Srikakulam district is a small village comprising of 162 households. Though it is one of the backward GPs in North Coastal region of AP, the community preferred construction of toilets over constructing houses which drove the GP to become the first ODF village in the whole District.

Until last year, there were only 50 toilets in the GP of which 20 were constructed under Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan (NBA) and the rest by the households themselves. Setting aside all political challenges and with the aim of developing their village, the GP team got the remaining houses’ toilets sanctioned under SBM. Motivational activities were conducted by the GP team, Village and Mandal level officials to complete the construction of toilets in a span of one year.
Nothing good comes ever easy:

The GP did not achieve its target easily. It has to face many challenges such as

- space constraint,
- Vasthu issues and
- Boundary issues with neighbours.

Local expertise in the form of Masons and Pandits was used effectively to overcome these hurdles. Pandits have helped in determining the direction where the toilets can’t be constructed which was one of the concerns of the residents. While Masons helped in deciding the measurements for toilets where there was not enough space in the household premises.

For families who had financial constraints, the Sarpanch took up the responsibility of financing initial stages of construction. With the help of the Mandal officials, the Sarpanch negotiated for competitive prices of raw material for construction which was procured in bulk quantities. Field Assistant Mr. Sagar had a crucial role to play in the dialogue with store managers and also in ensuring timely availability of material. The financial incapability of the residents was explained to the store managers who agreed to loan a part of the raw material until incentives were received by the residents.

To further motivate a few families that did not show any interest to initiate the construction, even after awareness activities, the Sarpanch declared that there would be more summer work for families who construct and utilize toilets.

An interesting tradition observed in the GP was that 5 families belonging to lower rungs of the traditional society were of an opinion that they were not eligible for toilets as having sanitation facilities will put them on the same pedestal as the others which is traditionally not the case. Instead of brushing off the problem as something to do with traditional beliefs, the Sarpanch convinced these 5 families that sanitation is a basic right of all human beings and that they should go ahead with the construction and later utilization of toilets in order to lead a healthy lifestyle.

It is appreciable that the GP team was successful in ensuring that migrants from the village were called back and assisted to finish their toilet construction as well. It was learnt that for the migrant families who could not be physically present in the GP, the Sarpanch, took responsibility to dig pits and assisted in the construction of their toilets.

Two water tanks were constructed to ensure sufficient availability in addition to encouraging rain water harvesting systems. Vanjangipeta is moving beyond ODF by concentrating on waste collection by installing dustbins at street ends, rainwater harvesting mechanisms, planning for a Sold, liquid waste management system to ensure drainage, and also dump yards for the GP.

"At first using gas as against firewood seemed difficult and also scary to a certain extent, but slowly we got used to it and now nobody can ever go back to firewood. Same is the case with toilets, in a short time everybody will get used to them," says Kamalamma a resident of the GP. “Comfort is not something human can let go off, if individuals get used to using toilets, it is difficult to stop using them” says an old man reconfirming what Kamalamma said.

Toilets were constructed beside kitchens, in the living rooms of houses, etc. due to lack of space. Though the need for toilets needs to be emphasised, such constructions do not serve the purpose of ensuring proper sanitation as they are situated in the house and any ill maintenance can directly affect individuals. Also, it was observed that in some houses, the toilets were much smaller than the stipulated measurements making the spaces congested for usage. In such cases, alternatives to toilets such as community toilets with individual ownership can be looked into.

In Vanjangipeta GP, toilets were constructed near kitchens, in living rooms etc. as a solution to space constraint. Effects of such constructions are to be examined as individuals are in direct contact with infections if there is no proper maintenance.