It does not really matter how many houses have toilet facility in a village. The very fact that there is no 100 per cent coverage makes open defecation a reality and hence a problem for the entire village. That is the case with Deepaladinne Palem.

D.D. Palem as it is popularly called is a Gram Panchayat (GP) in Guntur district with 194 households and a population of 760, across various communities. With just a few of the households having the toilet facility in DD Palem, many people resort to open defecation on GP roads. Due to this, people living along those roads are suffering directly or indirectly, with stench, contamination, filth spreading across the roads. While open defecation is a major problem for women, old people and children are inconvenienced too. It has been noticed that children are encouraged to defecate on the roads, near drains or houses just to avoid walking long distances to go out of the village. Some of the residents even lamented that they do not get visitors and relatives as there is no toilet in their house.

Open defecation has not been a single household problem in DD Palem. As one walked along the GP roads, one was surrounded by stench and disgusting sights. One of the residents during our interaction recalled how a woman was hit by an auto rickshaw in the darkness of the early morning and was forced to take bed rest. There were also other instances of people slipping and getting injured during rainy season.

But all this is now a thing of past in DD Palem. Under the Swachha Bharat Mission, the GP reached a mark of 100 per cent Individual Household Latrine (IHHL) cover after constructing 51 toilets. Before being declared as open defecation free, the Panchayat encountered quite a few challenges which it overcame with support from GP team (i.e., the Sarpanch, ASHA workers, Anganwadi workers, ANMs, Field assistants), community and Officials at Village, Mandal and District levels.

As it is with villages which welcome their new Sarpanches, DD Palem also waited to see what the Sarpanch will do for the village. And true to people’s expectations, the Sarpanch of DD Palem, delivered sanitation and health to the villagers. He resolved all the ground level problems in the initial
stage before initiating the construction work. While the Panchayat Secretary (PS) solved all eligibility and documentation problems, the remaining GP team members, such as Field Assistant, ASHAs and Anganwadi workers started motivating the households for IHHL construction.

The ground level process took 3-4 months and the GP team approached the Mandal-level officials for additional support by way of funding, bulk supply of material such as sand, bricks and other materials. Regular monitoring from the Mandal-level staff helped in motivating villagers to understand the importance of toilet facilities. Once the construction process took off, the GP team and Mandal level team started creating awareness for 100 per cent usage of the toilets. The GP team assured water availability and other facilities and after providing all these facilities, started disseminating health messages. So much was the effort that some households actually came forward to spend their own money for construction and also get better quality toilets in their homes. That was the level of motivation and awareness that the GP team managed to create in DD Palem.

Construction was only one part of the mission. The more important part was to make usage consistent. The GP team and Mandal level team took it upon themselves to motivate people for 100 per cent utilisation. But old habits die hard and people, used to open defecation for years, have been avoiding the newly-constructed IHHLs. To increase liability and change habits, the GP announced a fine of Rs.500 for anyone not using the toilet and defecating in the open. The teams formed by the GP started monitoring all the roads in early mornings and night time with the help of torch lights and whistles to control the open defecation process. This started showing positive results and more villagers have been motivated to build their own toilets. The GP had construction for rented houses also. The school toilets are also being maintained well though lack of water sometimes is affecting total cleanliness.

There is another example in the GP of DD Palem for sheer initiative and commitment from the community. The Head Master of the Primary School has taken up the responsibility of conveying key messages to the villagers, through the students. The Head Master, T. Seshagiri Rao is from Abburu, a model GP, and is posted at the D.D Palem School. Inspired by the work in his own village, he took it upon himself to spread a positive message in this village too and started spending some time every day talking to the school children about the importance of sanitation. He has been showing them IEC material already displayed on the school premises. The children pledge an oath of sanitation every day and most children have come to be aware of toilets usage, sanitation practices, waste disposal and hand washing practices etc.

Seshagiri Rao tells us an interesting anecdote about the father of one of the children who was not allowing his son to use the IHHL. When an IHHL was built in his house, the boy started using it regularly, but his father, under some misapprehension, stopped the boy. But the boy reacted to this and told his father that his headmaster at school explained to him about clean habits. In an amazing show of integrity and sincerity, the boy told his father that he was taking an oath of cleanliness every morning at school and that he cannot break the habit. The father had an interesting reason for stopping the boy. He reportedly said that while he and his wife are older and hence cannot walk far for defecating. Whereas the boy is young and can go out and defecate in the open. And why should not use it? Because then the pit will fill up quickly and they have to spend money to get it cleaned.

Due to his father’s pressure, the boy was forced to go out. Some of his school friends spotted him defecating in the open and started ridiculing him and passing remarks at the school and even on the streets. So, the boy refused to defecate in the open and yet his father was not yielding. So the boy approaches the headmaster and expressed his anguish that though he was mouthing the oath every day, he was unable to practise it. The headmaster responded to this and advised the boy to tell his father that the boy would not be allowed in school if he did not use the toilet. Next day, when the father spotted his son at home in school hours and got the message that using a toilet was important.

This story is a wonderful pointer to how every institution; every member of the community can play a crucial role on encouraging better sanitation practices.