

The Gross Toilet Index

The sorry state of toilets in public places, which are often stinky and non-functional, calls for the development of a Gross Toilet Index.

SHOBHIT MAHAJAN

The main building of the premier technology institute at Delhi was very impressive – solid and straight – almost Stalinist in its appearance. Austere yet functional. Everything, from the students with their tablets and laptops to the smell of freshly brewed coffee from the Café Coffee Day, was indicative of a with-it, well-managed place. That is, until one went to the public toilet. As one approached the toilet, the invariable and unmistakable stink was overpowering.

Go to any public building in our country and the first thing that strikes you is the abysmal state of the toilets in the building. Even new buildings would soon have toilets which are either non-functional or stinking – or, invariably, both. It doesn't matter whether the toilets are in universities or in the trains. We just don't seem to get it right!

One of the reasons for this olfactory and visual nightmare is that most toilets in public places simply don't work. A few days after they are built, the taps and the toilet seats are stolen or broken, the taps start leaking and invariably, there is just no water anywhere. The result of all this on the state of the toilets is obvious. And what is our response to these things? Not repair and maintenance. Instead, we'd rather just build a new one.

The department where I teach at the University of Delhi has over 800 students and about 200 staff members, and is spread over three buildings. The department, till recently, did not have a single toilet which was clean and fully functional.

This fact was especially embarrassing when an overseas visitor wanted to use the toilet.

Then, with a change of administration a few years ago, some Rs 50 lakh was sanctioned for refurbishing the toilets throughout the university. Pretty soon, all the toilets in our department were demolished (causing some hardship in the interim!) and replaced with marbled, exhaust-fanned conveniences. In less than a week, these symbols of good intentions were reduced to leaky, stinky places where the taps had been stolen and the cisterns broken. Precious resources literally down the drain!

This episode is symptomatic of a larger malaise. We are always ready to build afresh but don't really care about maintenance. The solution, it seems, to all our problems is to build and never really understand why the existing structures did not work. Whether it is toilets or institutions, we seem to believe that pumping resources into new projects is better than maintaining and fixing old ones. The result is that they both stink! Our universities are in a mess; don't bother about trying to fix them by an injection of funds and innovative ideas. Instead, make new institutions, which then conveniently serve as post-retirement sinecures for bureaucrats or academics. Of course, the scope for corruption in contracts, etc, associated with fresh construction is significantly more. Everyone is happy and it is a win-win situation for all concerned.

But toilets with broken taps and no water are not the only reason for the sad state of affairs. It seems that we are totally oblivious to the convenience of others or to basic cleanliness in public places. Train compartments are a case in point. Indian Railways is surely an institution which understands the ground reality. Hence, to prevent idle or wilful theft, the fans and the bulbs in the compartments are shielded behind metal grilles. It has also evolved a unique, minimalist design of its Indian-style lavatory. Nothing in it except a hole, a tap and a handle to hold you steady. One would assume that even the

Whether it is toilets or institutions, we seem to believe that pumping resources into new projects is better than maintaining and fixing old ones

most imbecilic person would be able to get it right. Seeing a hole in such a place, you just can't go wrong. No fancy buttons to be pressed or contraptions to be understood. But no! Just go into any train and you will see that we can't even get that much right. Obviously, intelligence, familiarity with gadgets/technology, etc, have little to do with it. It is, as if, we have decided, that we (don't) give a ****!

Waste disposal has a long history in our subcontinent. Archaeologists have found evidence of arrangements for running water and waste disposal in the houses of the elite in the Harappan cities. We certainly have a strong sense of purity and cleanliness when it comes to our personal abodes. However, non-functional and stinky public toilets are also ubiquitous. There is a disconnect between the personal and public space – thus, my neighbour, a devout lady who sweeps her house three times a day, puts her garbage in a polythene bag and throws it out of her balcony into the street.

I propose a new and, in my opinion, accurate index of the quality of governance for any institution – the Gross Toilet Index. The state of the public toilet in any institution serves as a true barometer of the quality of governance in the institution. Clean, functional, dry toilets would invariably indicate that the administration is receptive to the smallest detail and hence efficient and effective. Dirty, stinky, non-functional toilets would point to an administration that couldn't care less. Sadly, most institutions in the country, certainly in the Indo-Gangetic plains, are at the bottom of the ladder in the Gross Toilet Index. Public institutions and possibly the country as a whole, by this index, seem to have a huge governance deficit.

Shobhit Mahajan (shobhit.mahajan@gmail.com) is Professor of Physics & Astrophysics at the University of Delhi.