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## The loo as a wedding gift

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Few things in life are as compelling as a full bladder. In villages like Donje near Pune, it has led dhoti-clad men to discover strange nooks and often triggered unprintable exchanges if the nook happened to be in a neighbour's farm. Women aren't as lucky: though also pushed to the edge by this greater force, they perforce developed an iron self-control that made them rise before dawn or wait teeth-grittingly for the solitude of pitch-dark nights to escape prying eyes. The same old story of underdeveloped India.

Lately, however, the villagers of Donje have stopped pleading to the bushes for cover. For a gratifying Rs 7000, most of them have purchased privacy in the form of three concrete walls filled with thermocol and one plastic door, on which their names have now been immortalised with wet chalk.

These are the 'portable' toilets designed and provided to them by a smiling man called Ramdas Mane, who, though ensconced in the air-conditioned comfort of his own office today, was once just like them. As a young boy from Lodhawade, a village near Satara, Mane worked in a government employment scheme for Rs 2.50 a day and funded his own school education before joining and topping the wireman's course at ITI. Next came an apprenticeship with a Pune manufacturing company, where he soon rose to become maintenance engineer. When a thermocol-manufacturing company sought his advice to increase productivity, "their profits went up threefold, so they paid me Rs 40 lakh in cash" Mane says, almost unhappily. There's a reason: The amount convinced his wife that her husband had strayed, so she left home with their two kids, and stranded him for over a month. That's when he started his own business and vowed to use his income to give back something to his village.

At the back of Mane's mind was the experience of watching his mother, sister and wife control their "motions and emotions" or waiting endlessly for the elusive mistri to construct the expensive brick loo. In this unhygienic ambience, diseases and mosquitoes flourished gleefully.

These rustic memories prompted Mane to research the wonders of thermocol in construction. In Dubai, where the average temperature is over 40 degrees, he learnt that the state provided electricity only to homes made of thermocol bricks. "They're eco-friendly and help keep the room temperature down. Also, they last for over 100 years," says Mane, who then erected a readymade thermocol-and-concrete toilet in his village, a structure that could be transported anywhere with the help of a machine and set up within a couple of hours. After being attached to the drainage pipe nearby, it worked just like the average Indian loo.

The response to the readymade john was tremendous. Builders, hospitals, gram panchayats—everyone wanted one. Women from what Mane calls the "ruler area" (he means rural) wished him a long life over the phone. Recently, he got a call from an airline company asking for toilets to be used during its pilot-training exercises. The panchayat members of a nearby village, which is a famous halt for Pandharpur pilgrims, have also ordered a row of 20 toilets to make their stay pleasant. So far, Mane has supplied more than 5,000 toilets to over 350 villages; one of the beneficiaries was his own niece. "I gifted it to her during her wedding, discreetly, so that she did not miss city comforts," says Mane. Inspired by the idea, more and more villagers are including a portable toilet in the dowry of city girls who have to shift to a village after marriage.

Some things, however, will never change. In Donje, where a board outside the panchayat office announces that defecation in the open is a crime, sarpanch Namdeo Nidhalkar points to a row of three locked toilets. They all display the names of the rightful owners in chalk (one loo sports three co-owners' names). "Only people who have the keys can enter," says Nidhalkar. That's not completely true. Right now, mosquitoes are humming their way inside effortlessly, through shapeless holes in the plastic doors, made by playful kids here. "They throw stones," shrugs the sarpanch. Perhaps, even these should be made of thermocol.

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