

March 4, 2008

Dear Friends,

In January I visited Kameshwaram and these are some of the new developments.

1. 100 More ecosan in Kameshwaram by Gramalaya

An NGO called Gramalaya which has already done a lot of work on water and provision of potable water through economically friendly or low-cost technologies, has a contract to provide for 100 ecosan toilets in Kameshwaram. As some may recall, in the aftermath of the Tsunami, a group of industrialists from Coimbatore, under the banner of KOVAI raised funds to build permanent houses for the fisherfolk. However, the toilets were so badly planned that it was evident that they would not be used as toilets, but as store rooms or rooms for goats, or guests, if they were to be built that way. So Mr. Subburaman of SCOPE had contacted KOVAI and requested them not to go ahead with their plans, to which they agreed.

Currently, three different organizations are building toilets for the fisherfolk of Kameshwaram, and each is



doing with a different technology and it is clear to me that it is likely to be a mess and likely to raise social tensions. Let me explain why as we go on. But, I would be the happiest if I were to be proved wrong.

Let's start with the ecosan toilets on which we are collaborating. This is with Gramalaya and we are paying Rs.1000 by way of contribution towards each toilet and in return they (the fishermen) have agreed to practice waste management....more on that later.

There are a number of differences in the mode of operation of the project with Gramalaya, the main being that the construction is 'contracted out' and there is no participation in the building of the toilets by the family members. This is often the case with larger and more established service providers because they don't have to time to cement relations with the local population as their objective is to provide a specialized service and they go where the business takes them. One could expect that such a 'market mode' of transfer could lower the incentives for the villagers to use the toilet. But so far this doesn't seem

have been the case and the ladies we talked to were most happy to have a toilet, because now in the place of huts, they have to live in houses that are built back to back and 'privacy' is more crucial than ever. If a group of ladies go out early morning or late evening with small shovels, then everybody knows what they are going out for and the ladies feel terribly embarrassed of course.



The fact that Gramalaya is 'open' to ideas and is willing to go the extra mile to do the right thing was clearly proved. A number of people had remarked that the first toilets made by Gramalaya were somehow not very 'user friendly', but they couldn't explain why. So Mr. Subburaman of SCOPE went over and had a chat with people and found that given the land constraints the toilets had been made on a smaller space and actually when a person squatted on the toilet seat their knees banged against the wall and so clearly wasn't comfortable. Why had this happened in the first place? Well, because in general structures like ecosan targeting are regarded as 'deskilled' work, i.e. it is perceived



Gramalaya staff in Kameshwaram



New model with joint foot rest to save on space

that just about anybody can make one with a bit of training. While this is largely true, such perceptions lower the value of 'workmanship' and the 'tacit knowledge' required to make a structure functional and elegant. Often everything is in the details. And also while the recipients murmured their discontent to some of us, none of them had approached Gramalaya and told them that their knees were banging. This is because usually the poor people feel that since everything is being given to them quasi-free and they are not involved at all in the building of the toilets, they shouldn't complain.

Well, a few telephone calls, everything was settled. The initial toilets were torn down and the masons trained by SCOPE who have built the 250 ecosan toilets so far were employed built new ones that are comfortable. Now about 26 toilets have been built. The rest should be finished by March end.

2. Reciprocity clause with the fisherfolk In return for our financial participation in the toilets, each family of the fisherfolk will receive three buckets: blue (for fish & meat waste), green (for vegetal waste), red (for the rest). We will pay someone to collect the bins every morning from the families and put them in a designated spot.



Representatives of the fisherfolk

I will also be putting public waste bins that are functional and attractive (all suggestions are welcome) that cannot be stolen and can be emptied easily every 50 metres so that waste need not be thrown on the ground.

3. Kameshwaram has won the Nirmal Gram Puraskar award and how we intend to continue our collaboration

An award for Kameshwaram ! Last year, thanks to all those ecosan that you've helped to build Kameshwaram has been awarded the 'Nirmal Gram Puraskar', carrying a cash endowment of Rs 4 lakhs for achievements in sanitation. The Panchayat has agreed to let us collaborate for 1 lakh of the same and we are pondering over whether to invest it in waste management for the entire village, including all the farmers who have already received toilets or whether to invest it on toilets for the temple, which attracts scores of pilgrims during certain days of the year.



With the Panchayat of the village. In middle behind the prize is Mr. Kanaka Sundaram (CPIM party) who is elected Panchayat head. On extreme right is Mr. Paranjyothi who is our staff permanently in the village. I am on extreme left, flanked by Mr. Subburaman of SCOPE

4. Why some toilets may cause social tensions in Kameshwaramnew bad constructions



A set of very badly constructed houses and toilets by a partnership between two organizations called PCI and Dan Church Aid. Unfortunately, we are not even sure whether the industrialists in Coimbatore, the KOVAI group, who seem to have financed these organizations are aware of these problems. **So if any of the readers know any of these organizations, please talk to them because these must be repaired. They are posing a danger to the residents, who for the most part are too afraid to reside in them.**

They offered 'wet toilets' with septic tanks, which for many of the fisherfolk seemed to be reflective of 'upward social and economic mobility' and so they scrambled to be allocated houses with the 'modern toilets'. And they got a shock. With the first rains, the buildings crumbled, the pipes for the septic tank broke in a couple of weeks after construction. With rains, the sewage seeped out and faeces started floating around and there was a horrible over pervading stink. One of the ladies told me: **"Madam, you simply cannot imagine the stink. If there is a hell where bad people go to, it must be smelling like that!"** So they ran away to their relative's houses. Many of them are afraid to use the houses or the toilets. The Panchayat is trying to contact these organizations and get them to repair the damage.

Another NGO is going to build yet a third type of waste water system. It is going to build individual toilets with individual septic tanks. I met the builder, who has assured me that it will be ecologically safe and that I could test the wastewater coming out afterwards.

In other words, in a fishermen community where everyone had more or less the same kind of hut and no toilet before the tsunami, now some have better houses than others (because the contractors were not all the same and some were bad) and some are left with toilets that stink and don't work, some will have functioning wet toilets (with snob value) and some will have ecosan (which is regarded as good but country style!). Of course, everything might have end up fine, but still it is amazing such things happen.

5. What I need donations from you for this year: The Masons Ecosan Innovations contest

About 25 masons have built the 250 ecosan toilets in Kameshwaram and they are building the 100 more for Gramalaya. They come from an adjacent village and they have no toilets themselves. And I really think that's a shame. Second, as I mentioned earlier, there are very few incentives for masons to think of the quality of workmanship or try out new ideas, **because nobody is interested in their ideas anyway in these structures for the poor. Everybody just wants the job to be done, give the payment or receive the payment and end of story.**

So there is no opportunity to see what kind of creative ideas or the functionality of a toilet.

Let's give them a chance. I want to organize a contest for the most innovative ecosan toilet. Each mason can be given the funds to build a toilet for his family. A toilet costs between 7000 to 9000 Rupees. Let's keep this as 10,000 rupees to include transport for materials and for the judges (who will be a set of architects who will judge for free, with us covering their costs). This way the masons will finally get toilets for their families and we can see if we can set new standards in building of toilets for the poor that are beautiful and functional and innovative. **So this is how we will be using the funds given by individual families. We want families to group together and suggest a name for their toilet. That way, if the donor families ever come to Kameshwaram, they can see the toilet their money went for ! For each toilet we need Rs. 10,000.**



6. Finally, two nice news from my side personally : Trophy “Women of the Earth” from the Yves-Rocher Foundation and the ‘Institut de France’ in Paris and the Charles Cooper Annual Memorial Lecture at Maastricht.

There's lots more to tell but it will have to be for next time. As I have said before, I think personally for me this project has opened new vistas, new friends, new competencies, experiencing of new joys and



*downsides....and a real need for time management ! In this line, there are two good things that have happened to me recently and it's thanks to the project, i.e. to all of you. **So a big thanks to all of you!** First, I am one of the five women to be awarded a trophy called ‘Women of the Earth’ in France this year. It is sponsored by the foundation of Yves-Rocher and awarded jointly with the Ministry of Sustainable Development in France (info in French)*

<http://prod.yr.marques.prosodie.net/fondation/laureates/laureate5.php>

I'm going to use the funds for testing the compost in Kameshwaram in an attempt to establish norms for quality of compost with Mr. Subburaman of SCOPE and a team of scientists. Second, and this had nothing to do with the other thing, I had been invited to deliver a prestigious speech, called the Charles Cooper Annual Memorial lecture and I have written..... on what else but toilets ! Entitled, "Playing in Invisible Markets: Toilet Innovations and Empowerment", I will be happy to pass on my lecture-article to anyone who is interested in reading it and receive their comments.

<http://www.merit.unu.edu/charlescooper/lecture2.htm>

Till next time. Best Wishes,

Shyama V. Ramani