



**Toilet Beauty Contest 2009:
Lessons learnt on promotion of ecosan toilets as a pro-poor innovation**

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**With inputs from FIN staff and invited experts:
(in alphabetical order)**

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Summary

In India, in rural areas, men are reluctant to use toilets as it goes against notions of masculine virility, unless it happens to be raining! So, millions of rupees have been (and are continuing to be) spent on toilets, which are only used by women for the most part. Furthermore, in most sanitation coverage programs the post-construction monitoring focuses on ‘usage of toilet’ in the very run short time period following the construction. There is no effort made to examine if the value of the toilet is enhanced by any efforts invested by the users. In other words, there is no construction or exploitation of feed-back loops with the end-user.

The ‘Toilet beauty contest’ has thus been initiated by FIN as an instrument to counter the above problems. It operates with the following rules:

- All members of the family have to use the toilet for at least 4 months.
- There are prizes given for value enhancement through growing of plants around the ecosan toilet. The ‘best garden’ around ecosan toilet contest proposes first prize
- There are prizes given for value enhancement through introduction of ‘innovation’ by the family in the form of unique decoration, new uses, different design or installation of new objects within or outside the family ,

Thus, on the 17th and 18th of July 2009, a multi-disciplinary team of ‘judges’: Sangeeta Venkatesh (founder Svanishta, consultant and writer on environmental issues), Malavika Ramanujam (architect), Oswald Quintal (Director Kudumbam – expert on organic farming); Gita Balakrishnan (Ethos) and Felix Raj (architect) examined 66 toilets that had been built by Gramalaya with the financial sponsorship. The criteria for the judgment and the corresponding points were formulated by Gita Balakrishnan (Ethos),

In conducting the second toilet beauty contest we learnt the following:

→ Toilet beauty contests are a ‘good evaluation mechanism of usage’, because they take place only after 12-18 months after usage and reveal the real problems that aid or obstruct the complete usage of toilets.

→ In the batch of toilets examined in Kameshwaram, the first and foremost obstruction for usage is faulty construction and the second problem is that the end-users had not received sufficient education in using or maintaining the toilet.

→ In this second year-round of the ‘Toilet Beauty Contest’ there were no technical innovations that came from the end-users in terms of design or expansion of the functions of the toilet.

→ As in the first contest, ‘wall murals’ as a feature of decoration was most striking. This helps us identify the artistic talent in the village. The creative youngsters responsible for such paintings can be promoted in future projects.

→ **The investment in toilet gardens was most impressive. There was also a lot of initiative taken to use compost from the ecosan toilets to test the strength vis-à-vis natural growth. It was interesting that ecosan made traditional fishermen also explore the potential of kitchen gardens in addition to toilet gardens.**

→ The main conclusion for future strategy is that any sanitation program is incomplete without investment in building capacity in toilet technicians (plumber, mason, and carpenter) in the village itself. Such services have to be developed so that ecosan toilets can be maintained well and the sanitation program is sustained. Simply constructing toilets is not enough.



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1. Context: Why a beauty contest for toilets?

The primary objective of the ‘Toilet Beauty Contest’ is to motivate men to use toilets by making it mandatory for all members of the family to use the toilets in order to enter the contest. The second objective is to induce improvements in design and expansion of functions from the user-families themselves – i.e. promote innovation creation by end-users. The third objective is to promote exploitation of urine and compost obtained from the toilet to grow a kitchen garden and enhance the value of the toilet by making it an object of beauty through simple but personalized decoration.

To achieve the above, cash prizes are awarded under two contests: (i) Innovation contest: - improvement in design, expansion of use, any installation, any creative decoration; (ii) Toilet garden contest – for best garden grown using waste produced in toilet. The cash prizes were Rs 2500, Rs 2000 and Rs 1000 respectively.

2. The Target Community for toilet beauty contests

Toilet beauty contest target first time users because once the habit kicks in, the toilets are likely to be maintained properly. In Kameshwaram, in 2008, the NGO Gramalaya obtained a contract to build 100 toilets from Water Aid International (UK). Normally, the recipients are asked to invest Rs 1000 up front to ensure use of toilets after construction. Then the concerned NGO usually files for reimbursement from the Indian Government under the ‘TSC’ or ‘Total Sanitation Campaign’ program and the initial investment of recipient family is returned, making the toilet ‘absolutely free’. FIN offered to pay the Rs 1000 on behalf of each recipient family so that in return they would participate in a waste management program. These households were the target households for the ‘Second Toilet Beauty Contest’ of FIN.

3. The judges and criteria for judgment:



We had a multi-disciplinary group as ‘judges’ (see photo from left to right): Sangeeta Venkatesh (founder Svanishta, consultant and writer on environmental issues), Malavika Ramanujam (architect), Oswald Quintal (Director Kudumbam – expert on

organic farming); Gita Balakrishnan (Ethos) and. Felix Raj (architect). The criteria for the judgment and the corresponding points were formulated by Gita Balakrishnan (Ethos), who was also a judge of the toilet beauty contest in 2007.

- **Best Presentation and Innovation**
 - Individuality (for inside 15 + outside 15 points)
 - Innovation (for inside 15 + outside 15 points)
 - Presentation (for inside 10 + outside 10 points)
 - Cleanliness & Hygiene (for inside 10 + outside 10 points)
- **Best Outside Space and Garden**
 - Appearance (30 points)
 - Sustainability (30 points)
 - Sensitivity to neighbours (20 points)
 - Choice of Plants and hard landscape (20 points)

4. Evaluation of State of Toilets and their Usage

General Observations: As compared to the first set of 150 toilets built by SCOPE and UNICEF, the second batch built by Gramalaya is of much inferior quality. The reason proposed by way of explanation is that during the period of construction there was a severe hike in inflation which led to cost-cutting. Whatever the reasons, the second set of toilets stands as a ‘textbook case study’ of the ‘poor quality’ that characterizes most construction for the poor in India. There seems to have been a lack of interest or supervision in the construction of the ecosan and very little care taken in educating the beneficiaries on how to use or maintain the toilets. Out of 100 toilets that have been constructed about only 50 seem to be used properly either because the toilet is faulty or the family has not been properly educated on its use.

However, on their own, the fishermen families have shown great ingenuity in growing a variety of fruit bearing trees and shrubs. Some are also experimenting to confirm the impact of using compost obtained from ecosan toilets. Oswald noted that a variety of bananas and other fruits were much bigger than when obtained without compost or even with vermicompost.

Finally, there is a real need to build capacity to maintain and repair toilets. A team of locals have to be trained.

The above facts have come to light only because of holding the toilet beauty contest that permitted a proper evaluation of the state of the toilets and their usage.



4.1 Physical State of Toilets in 2009

-Eroding walls due to use of Country bricks without plastering: In many toilets bricks are already eroding. This is because country bricks are of heterogeneous quality. Typically, in batches of bricks sold there are always some defective ones.

When bricks aren't burnt properly they start eroding soon. One of the solutions is to plaster. Plastering increases costs and therefore was not undertaken by Gramalaya in this case.

Solution: *Plastering and Masonry work*

-Leaky roofs: Most roofs are leaking during time of rain. Right now two slabs are placed on top and there are cracks in the middle through which leaks occur and there are also leaks through the corners. Leaks might also occur due to insufficient curing or over-thin slabs.

Solution: *have thicker joint slab at a slope. Another solution is to do away with the slab and instead use tiles, sheet or even thatch as roofs.*

-Horizontal cracks: No line has been traced between the bricks. **There has been no pointing:** This leads to loosening of some bricks under the weight of the load giving rise to horizontal cracks.

Solution: Pointing is the finishing treatment given to the joint lines between courses of brick masonry with mortar. It helps in ensuring that these joints are stronger and also makes a difference on the appearance. Pointing is carried out only in the case of exposed masonry. It may not even be required if the masons do a good job of the masonry and finish the joints as they are constructing the superstructure. Pointing at a later stage is also costly.



-Doors that are falling out, falling apart or posing a danger (See left): The tin sheet used is very inferior. In some cases it is coming out of the doors. The hinges are coming out. Latches are rusty. Latches and bolts for the door are missing. There are a couple of door (4 to 5) which have to be removed each time in order to close the toilet.

Solution: *Replace the door. Even good quality of the hinges and painting of the door frames may have helped.*

- Inappropriate locations: In some cases, the door to the toilet is nearly inaccessible. The user has to squeeze himself or herself between wall of house and toilet to access door of toilet. Sometimes, it is at the bottom of a slope with water clogging during rains. In some cases, it is so near the wall or near bushes so that the compost

chamber lid cannot be opened with great difficulty.

Solution: *No solution possible.*

4.2 Observations on usage:

- **Non-usage:** Out of the 100 toilets, there are many which are not being used. Exact number has to be ascertained.

- **Some beneficiaries do not know how to use toilets.**

- In many houses there is no cover for the compost pit hole.
- In some houses both the chambers were being used simultaneously.

- **Most beneficiaries do not know how to open compost chamber.**

- **Some fishermen are so put off by the non-use and problems of toilets that they never want to have toilets**

- **Toilet hole is blocked** -pipe is getting full with ash.
- *Solution : Increase diameter of pipe, Don't glue at one place. Put screen into hole.*

- **There is no-one to go to for help if there is any problem.**

- *Solution: Build capacity in plumbers/masons who can repair ecosan.*

5. The Prize winners

5.1 Innovation in design, decoration or usage

1st prize - Mrs.Anjammal and Mr.Anjappan



What's different ? Their 17 year old son shown on left thought it would be a good idea to use the wall of the bathroom to make a mural. The fishermen want a harbour in Kameshwaram and he captured the idea with a mural of a boat sailing in an ocean filled with fish with a sun shining brightly. This is creativity.

- Mrs.Naiammal and Mr.Balasubramanian – 2nd prize.

What's different ? The bathroom is put in a very bad location and it's difficult to squeeze between the wall of the house and toilet. Yet, the entire family uses it and because the toilet is just adjacent to a neighbour's kitchen, they have taken care to maintain it well so that no bad odours disturb the neighbours.



3rd Prize - Mrs.Anjammal and Mr.Ariasami

What's different ? Mrs. Anjammal has devised an ingenious system of rope knots to keep the door from falling out and thereby permitting its use.

5.2 Creative toilet gardens

1st prize - Mrs.Nagavalli and Mr. Lakshmanan

What's different ? Mr. Laksmanan despite being a fisherman and not a farmer, has experimented with compost produced by ecosan to test out its impact on growth of different varieties of bananas in his kitchen garden. He has also successfully produced banana varieties that are not native to these parts.



2nd Prize - Mrs.Nadia and Mr.Mahendran

What's different ? Mrs. Nadia has produced a lush garden of coconut trees and banana trees just next to her ecosan toilet and is proud of her harvest.

**3rd Prize - Mrs.Kodiammal and Mr.Chittiappan**

What's different ? The kids are trying to grow a lawn ! They find that the urine from the ecosan is helping the lawn to grow. Earlier they had tried to grow a lawn using water and now with the ecosan they have to water the lawn much less.

6. Recommendations for Future Ecosan Sanitation Projects

Lack of satisfaction of the following conditions leads to dysfunctioning and abandoning of the toilets and makes it doubly difficult to motivate the people to use toilets even if they are repaired.

For Financiers giving contracts to NGOs

- ⇒ **Make NGOs accountable not only for number of toilets built but also their quality of construction:** Since contracts are given only for quantity and not quality of toilets, in order to maximize the margin over costs, quality is often sacrificed in the name of 'local participation' or 'local purchases'. Again to maximize contract revenue, there is 'quick construction' or construction in haste without sufficient curing of materials in between. The 'real' quality of construction is revealed only with usage. Therefore, premiums must be given for good quality construction through evaluation after 12-18 months.
- ⇒ **Make NGOs accountable for more than construction of ecosan by giving medium term rather than short-term contracts:** If NGOs are only given contracts for building toilets, then in order to maximize their revenue generation from contracts, they aim to build the maximum number of toilets in the minimum of time without concern for usage. Therefore, a contract must be formulated so that there are resources for local capacity building in maintenance and usage in the post-construction period.

Recommendations for NGOs – in addition to the usual one of having 'Education' and 'Motivation' as a first step before construction

- ⇒ **Get contracts that allow for presence for 12-18 months after construction:** If an NGO undertakes Ecosan construction – it has to ensure presence in the target zone at least for 18 months to monitor that the ecosan are used properly and that the beneficiaries know how to empty the compost chamber.
- ⇒ **Undertake construction work only if there are adequate funds for good quality construction:** If an NGO undertakes sanitation coverage of any sort, then it must have adequate funds to construct proper toilets.

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❖ The judges!



❖ The dignitaries who graced the occasion such as the collector of Nagapattinam C. Munianathan.

❖ And the villagers themselves!



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