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Toilet funds down the drain

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Hyderabad, Nov. 18: Despite targets periodically set by the government, sanitary facilities in most states in the country have improved little over the centuries.

In Andhra Pradesh, 60 per cent of households in villages and 25 per cent in urban areas still do not have a toilet.

Even when toilets are built, they are not used. Some 42 lakh individual latrines were built in the state in the last one decade, but 70 per cent of them are lying unused. Official statistics show that Andhra Pradesh tops the country in having the lowest number of working toilets.

The toilets are used for almost every conceivable purpose other than their intended use. In many households in villages, toilets have become granneries, kitchens or dumping spaces.

On the eve of World Toilet's Day, health and sanitary experts caution that open defecation and badly maintained toilets are the biggest threats to public health in Andhra Pradesh.

They say 80 per cent of all sickness and diseases such as diarrhoea, cholera, filaria, and certain venereal and skin diseases are due to poor sanitation.

Each gram of faeces can contain 10 million virus particles, one million bacteria, 1,000 parasite cysts and 100 parasite eggs.

Dr Anup Lahari, dermatologist at Apollo Hospitals said: "Most of my patients who have certain sexually transmitted diseases say they got the infection at public toilets. Using the commode in any public toilet is a direct gateway to infection unless it is maintained really well."

Knowing the condition of most public toilets, people prefer not to use them. But this can lead to other problems. Dr Rajneesh Reddy, consultant surgeon, gastroenterology, says that retention or going without urinating for long periods of time can result in urinary tract infection and other disorders.

Poor maintenance of public toilets is one reason why people have stopped using them. Another reason is the faulty design of the lakhs of individual toilets constructed by the government up to 2004-2005. These toilets constructed under the Integrated Low Cost Sanitation (ILCS) Scheme did not have a roof and were very cramped.

A government sponsored study to find out why the scheme had failed revealed that open top toilets gave the feeling of an incomplete latrine, congested space and lack of privacy.

Moreover, there was no water supply and users had to carry their own water. Defecating in the open was, comparatively, more comfortable and probably more hygienic.

If sanitation is to improve, a way must be found to maintain public toilets, provide many more of them, and to educate people about the health implications of defecating anywhere and everywhere.