

Mobilizing Panchayats for Sanitation

By Ashok Dash

Aliyar village in Farukhnagar tehsil of Gurugram district, Haryana, is one of five villages where Sehgal Foundation and Maruti Suzuki India Ltd (MSIL) are collaborating on a project called, *Swacchata Hai to Swasthaya Hai* (sanitation and hygiene is health).

Many of the 534 families living in the village are socially and politically divided as either Rajput or Pundits, which made it challenging to mobilize the *panchayat* (village council) to participate in development work. MSIL built a number of structures in this village, including the water ATM (automated water-dispensing unit), a school building, a bus stand, dustbins for garbage disposal, while collaborating with Sehgal Foundation to mobilize the community to take ownership of the infrastructure to ensure sustainability. Housekeeping personnel supported by MSIL looked after the day-to-day sanitation of roads, drains, and garbage dumps. To maintain cleanliness and prevent waterlogging, the company designed and constructed household gully traps, vital components for directing wastewater to manholes and preventing waterlogging in the streets.

However, despite all the improvements benefiting the community, the panchayat was not willing to maintain the structures. The *sarpanch* (village council head) felt that maintenance of infrastructure should be the responsibility of MSIL, and the panchayat had nothing to do with it. Another big challenge was mobilizing the individual households for connecting to the gully traps (a basin in the ground which receives piped wastewater from the household before it is emptied into the sewer), as the households were not willing to bear the cost of the connection. With continuous mobilization efforts, including group meetings and door-to-door campaigns, the foundation team was able to convince the community and the panchayat to connect 517 households to gully traps. Only seventeen households remained unconnected.



A typical gully trap design for safe wastewater disposal



Door-to-door visits explaining the use of gully traps

Subsequent meetings of ward committees, the panchayat, and other key villagers helped to create a positive dialogue. A series of street plays on the importance of gully trap connection helped get across the value of sanitation. The sarpanch understood and endorsed the importance of gully trap connections for a clean village with proper wastewater disposal mechanisms and agreed to fund the remaining unconnected households. Besides taking funding ownership, the sarpanch led the initiative through daily monitoring. As a result, all households in the village now have gully trap connections and the roads are visibly clean. The community opinion that maintenance of infrastructure was MSIL's sole responsibility is steadily changing, and the panchayat is coming forward to take ownership for maintaining the sanitation infrastructure in the village.

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