



## Film

## Looking at India's sanitation divide



Viacom 18 Motion Pictures

**Toilet: A Love Story**

Directed by Shree Narayan Singh  
 Written by Siddharth Garima  
 Produced by Viacom 18 Motion Pictures, KriArj Entertainment, Friday Filmworks, Plan C Studios, and Cape of Good Films LLP, 2017  
 155 min

*Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* (Toilet: A Love Story) is a movie vividly sketching the current sanitation situation in India, which is similar to many other southeast Asian countries. Nearly 600 million of India's population do not have access to a toilet. The prime ministerial initiative, the Clean India Mission by Narendra Modi, had a mixed response in many states where cultural dogma on sanitation prevails. Entangled with the culture and tradition, people prefer to defecate in the open. The religious impediment is even worse, and as a consequence eradication of open defecation is challenging.

In the movie, directed by Shree Narayan Singh, Keshav (acted by Akshay Kumar), who is a rural resident and a son of a revered pundit in north India, suffers from the separation of his newly wed wife Jaya (Bhumi Pednekar), who comes from a relatively urban family with access to a toilet. Jaya is appalled and frustrated to know that she does not have a toilet at her husband's house and she would have to follow the villagers for an early morning walk to the bush on the second day of her wedding. Jaya's reluctance to comply with her neighbours to join the open defecation provokes a series of incidents. As a result, her husband promises to construct a toilet at the house.

Keshav's father strongly opposes, remarking that constructing a toilet within the confines of the house where a holy plant *Tulsi* (*Ocimum sanctum*) is grown is strongly considered to be impure. Jaya's expectation keeps looming, hoping her father-in-law will change his opinion about constructing a toilet, which—unfortunately—does not happen any sooner. Although the movie leads with the central theme of the impact of the absence of a toilet at a personal level, it also interrelates the cultural, religious, political, and emotional values embedded in it.

The movie passionately explores the emotional tolls at a personal level, in which a newly wedded couple undergo huge sufferings and frustration. Jaya, out of dissatisfaction, finally returns to her home as she finds defecating in the open against a woman's dignity and self-respect. This belief shows a limit of stoicism for an Indian woman when she is deprived of the basic needs. The movie has well portrayed the everyday challenges of women defecating in the open, which includes harassment by men, sexual abuse, fear of animals, and being late for household work. Keshav, disturbed by the separation with his wife, vows to fight against all the stereotypes against constructing a toilet and the apathy of the government, who despite promising the installation of toilets to every citizen delays implementation of toilet construction. Such a delay—attributed to the billion dollar scam on toilet construction in Indian states—is well accentuated in the movie and it occurred despite the commitment at the central government to build new

toilets. The movie bravely delves deeper into the scam on toilet construction that actually has seen involvement of top-ranking politicians in India.

Keshav's dream of the toilet and consequent restoration of his relationship with his wife aborts after the villagers rattled his newly constructed toilet with mattocks and hammers led by his own father. Having passed through failures at home and at village, the couple decide to divorce out of persisting agony. By now, the media has put the divorce case—being unique of its kind—into the spotlight, and just before the court hearing, the Indian Government pressured by the media decides to instigate the toilet construction and halt the court's proceedings.

Last but not the least, the movie showed the convergence of changes in his father's belief, and the government's imminent initiative to intervene to build a toilet. In our opinion, this movie bears a huge relevance in the context of India and neighbouring countries, where even today open defecation is rampant and pervasive, particularly in the rural region. Additionally, one of the immediate effects this movie has instigated is a trend in India where husbands are building toilets as a gift to their wives.

In a laudable move, the Indian movie industry, particularly Bollywood, has jettisoned the traditional rhetoric of commercial movies, and has displayed a real-world message to its middle-class audience. Only some movies can be as close to having a health subject theme as this one. But the success of this movie will spur further movies in Bollywood, and other movie industries in neighbouring countries. The risk of bringing such a neglected yet often perceived as ritually impure topic into this film has paid off very well. The movie has made a total revenue of US\$3.5 million in the global market.

The recent development in Bollywood has to be credited to screenwriters keen to tackle real-world stories and the producers who invested in such movies. Equally laudable is the contributions of the lead actors Akshay and Bhumi, who risk their stardom, to bring to the surface the nation's sanitation problem. The scope of this movie is not only commercial; therefore, encouragement of such films in the future can become a powerful tool for advocacy not just in India but across the whole of south Asia, where a third of people practice open defecation every day.

Nevertheless, a movie alone cannot change the problem rooted for millennia. As the legendary actor Anupam Kher, Jaya's uncle in the movie says, "If you change nothing, nothing will change". Change will happen only when we leave our prejudices behind.

*Bipin Adhikari, Shiva Raj Mishra*