

# Sanitarily yours...

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Manure that is collected from dry composting toilets is hygienic. Photo: G. Gautama

## [A school in Kanchipuram pays what could possibly be the best tribute to Gandhi](#)

On television, Vidya Balan charmingly advises young girls to reject marriage if the groom's house has no toilet. Girls should also ask who will clean the toilet, whether there will be water to clean it, and where the drainage goes. They might also perhaps do some research and find out about toilets that use no water.

This Gandhi Jayananti, an urgent solution to manual scavenging is crying for attention. Gandhi invited his people to think about the future with fresh ideas. He told those at the margins to discard their lethargy, reject fatalism and claim their own dignity through non-violent assertion. Where sanitation was concerned, he urged his people to get rid of the fear of human excreta.



Visiting children from Chennai take part in dry compost harvesting. Photo: V.R. Devika

In the village of Vallipuram in Kanchipuram district of Tamil Nadu, the sky is ablaze with the rising sun and a gentle breeze is blowing as girls and boys carrying long sticks and jute bags set off for harvest day at Pathashaala, a residential learning centre run by Krishnamurti Foundation India (KFI).

They are [harvesting manure from dry composting toilets](#). There is laughter in the air as teachers, students, drivers, and farm and kitchen help, all work together to collect the manure in jute bags and redistribute it among the plants. Later, they get together after a nice long bath and hold a special assembly.

Back home in Chennai, I am required to urgently call a plumber to clear clogged drainage pipes. On the road outside, people are tip-toeing around the overflowing sewage. As the secretary of the apartment complex, I am responsible for getting the drainage chambers cleaned up. I call up the service person who says the only solution to the problem is the intervention of a manual scavenger.

"Pathashaala has been using only dry compostings since 2010," says G. Gautama, director of Pathashaala. "Gandhi demonstrated the power of a large number of people doing a simple action. The composting toilet is an idea whose time may have come," he says, explaining that these toilets are eco-friendly and also use far less water.

The functioning of the dry toilet is simple. Each toilet bowl has two compartments, for liquid and solid waste. Urine gets segregated and diluted with water turning it into an excellent nutrient for plants. Solid waste falls into a chamber below and is covered by the user with a fistful of sawdust kept in a bucket. After six months of use, one toilet is closed and the other is used. Six months later, manure is harvested from the first toilet bowl, while the second one gets shut. Human solid waste reduces substantially on drying and dry fecal matter also becomes free of pathogens when left to stand for six months. There is no septic tank and no stench. October 2 and April 2 are fixed manure harvesting days at Pathashaala. Observing the process, one does not see uneasiness on the part of any student or staff member.

"There have been successful experiments in rural settings," says IAS officer Shantha Sheela Nair who took part in a harvest at Pathashaala. "Architects and urban builders must adopt these in urban settings. There is perhaps a fear of maintenance and smell but people can get rid of their fear only when they use it."

The dry composting toilet makes us completely responsible for the waste we generate in an ecologically sensible and completely hygienic manner. The normal flush toilet uses 10,000 to 20,000 litres of water per person per year.

"Human excreta is just a byproduct of digested food. If we constantly remember it as such and not as something dirty, no one will feel bad to touch the manure," says Arumugham, the driver of the school van who lives in the village nearby. Tired of clogged pipes and overflowing sewage from drainage, he has requested for a dry toilet to be installed in his home in the village.

"The best way of not polluting water is to not create dirty water," explains Gautama. "Lifestyle change is possibly the acid test of learning. Pathashaala demonstrates that it is possible to make significant lifestyle shifts that are environmentally sound."

The learning centre began functioning with 14 students and three teachers in 2010. Every new toilet built since then has been an improvement on the previous versions. Now, with over a 100 students, fifth-generation dry composting toilets have been installed. The centre is now enthused to innovate dry composting toilets for the larger public to be used in apartment complexes.

Students are extremely enthusiastic and have voiced their desire that *Pathashaala must have only dry toilets*. Years of use has built that conviction. However, they also felt that the toilets must be elegant and good looking. So a lot of effort went into designing a stainless steel toilet in the summer of 2012. These were hardy, elegant and found easy acceptance.

One of the questions often raised is why there are only Western-style toilets in Pathashaala and why the healthier Indian-style latrine was not being used. To address this need, a different solution was attempted in 2015 using no fabrication or moulding. It was possible to design a toilet with just cement and tiles that lent itself to Indian and Western style use. It also has a smaller area for cleaning and this is considered a big advantage.

Compost harvesting is a cheerful happy occasion at Pathashaala and a good way for the community to remember Gandhi.

The teachers at Pathashaala understand that there is an emerging crisis in water availability. Treating water with care and as a precious commodity is something that we could all benefit from. Treating our waste not as a problem but as an asset will soon become a necessity.

As Gautama aptly puts it, "Sanitation is much more than water use. It is an individual decision about what price one is willing to pay for what one does... and what doors one does not wish to close for the next generation."

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[www.pcfi-kfi.org/pathashaala](http://www.pcfi-kfi.org/pathashaala)

#### **Mahabalipuram's Students Work for a Hygienic Tomorrow**

**Over the past few years, a cultural activist has found a unique way to celebrate Gandhi Jayanti by putting the Mahatma's messages into action, in Mahabalipuram, students from Chennai are learning the importance of recycling waste through compost harvesting.**

Video on harvesting compost from dry toilets at Pathashaala.

[www.pcfi-kfi.org/pathashaala](http://www.pcfi-kfi.org/pathashaala)

[Pathashaala is looking for educator-learners who are enthusiastic and brave to try a different approach to school education](http://www.pcfi-kfi.org/pathashaala)

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