

Building the basics

GOOD CAUSE A CSR initiative by Biocon is working towards providing basic amenities like sanitation, drinking water and healthcare to the people of Anekal taluk, writes A Varsha Rao

Hennagara is a village in Anekal taluk, where the practice of open defecation still prevails. Research says that in Hennagara Gram Panchayat, which has a population of 30,000 in eight villages, around 70 per cent of the villagers have household toilets, while the rest resort to open defecation. Biocon Foundation, a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) effort of Biocon, is working towards ensuring that a healthier and better future is in store for Hennagara and many other villages, which lack basic amenities.

Rani Desai, head, Biocon Foundation, explains, "A high percentage of people who came to our primary healthcare centres — Arogya Raksha Yojana Clinic (ARY) — complained about gastroenteritis, skin problems, fever, nausea and other such issues, which are preventable illnesses. Hence, we decided to focus on better sanitation and water facilities to avoid such health problems."

"Looking at the issues, we saw a dire need for a comprehensive solution and thus, decided to build sanitation facilities for those below poverty line. Depending on their needs, we have built individual toilets for every home, either inside or outside their homes," says Santhosh Naik, programme manager at Biocon Foundation.

Keshav Reddy, president, Hennagara Gram Panchayat says, "We had heard about Biocon's CSR work and decided to approach them for some aid. About 100 toilets have been constructed now, which has helped reduce the healthcare issues by a great deal. So, in collaboration with the gram panchayat, the Foundation has built 924 toilets to date. A community sanitation facility has also been built in the village, right behind the temple in order to cater to crowds during the annual *jatre*. While the private toilets are maintained by the people themselves, the community toilet is maintained by the Foundation.



FOR QUALITY LIFE Some of the toilets built in Hennagara; (inset) women at the local water supply centre.

Apart from Hennagara Gram Panchayat, the Foundation has also worked in the villages of Huskur Gram Panchayat, 20 km away from Bengaluru. Home to the famous Maddurama Temple, Huskur village sees a great number of footfalls during the annual *jatre*. Since the village lacked basic sanitation facilities, the Foundation decided to build private toilets for every household. A survey undertaken with the help of the gram panchayat committee revealed that out of a total of 1,123 households, only 249 (22 per cent) had toilets at home.

Community representation

Manjula, a beneficiary of the initiative says, "At first, we used to defecate in the open. But for the past one year, we have been using toilet, which is so much better and safe." But convincing someone who is used to age-old practices to switch was not easy. Santhosh agrees, "It was quite difficult. But we didn't rush. We conducted awareness programmes to help them understand the link between health and sanitation." Rani sheds light on a vital aspect, "We usually go to those places where we get a strong representation from the community, otherwise it becomes very hard, functionally."

When residents of the village complained of gastrointestinal issues and water-borne infections, the Foundation saw a need for proper drinking water.

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This is when they established Project One — a water purification system in Huskur village. Kumar, who works at the unit, explains the logistics: "Reverse Osmosis and Ultra Violet technology is employed to treat water here. Around 5,000 villagers utilise the purified water every day and almost 10,000 litres of water is sold per day, in cans of 20 litres at Rs two per can." B Madhu, the temple convenor, believes that these activities have brought about a huge change in their lives. "Earlier, our village was like a slum. Now with improved infrastructure, we are happy and content," he says.

Apart from sanitation, the Foundation also focuses on healthcare. The villagers avail all the major health facilities, at a subsidised rate at the ARY clinic. In a bid to make the process seamless, the Foundation has also established ELAJ, an online medical platform in all ARY clinics. Consequently, there's no paperwork involved and everything about the patient gets recorded and stored in an electronic database. The Foundation has also stepped into the fields of education and civic infrastructure in different regions of the State. Talking about future plans, Rani says, "We are trying to make our preventive healthcare initiatives stronger and optimise our processes. We are strengthening our presence in this field by conducting regular camps on cervical cancer, oral cancer, diabetes and hypertension."