

Looking for a clean public toilet in Mumbai

Local trains may be the lifeline of Mumbai, but for Mumbaikars on the go, especially women, it is nearly impossible to answer the call of nature while travelling.

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“They charge each user Rs 5 but the conditions here are the worst,” said Gayatri More, while waiting in a queue outside the public toilet at Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus (CSMT), one of the busiest railway stations in Mumbai.

Local trains may be the lifeline of Mumbai, but for Mumbaikars on the go, especially women, it is nearly impossible to answer the call of nature while travelling, all thanks to the condition of public toilets. Unfortunately, this is true of most public places, be it railway stations, hospitals, courts or other government establishments that are visited frequently by women.

Following International Women's Day celebrations, observed across the globe on March 8, The Indian Express visited a few spots to understand the situation on the ground and to hear what the women of Mumbai have to say about being denied the "right to pee" while they are out and about in the city for various reasons.

At CSMT, there is just one public complex for women having three toilets. Gayatri added, "By the time I am done, 10 more will be in line. Clearly, there are many users."

Not only are the public toilets inadequate for the number of women travellers, they are also unusable, thanks to the strong stench, dirty seats and garbage strewn all around, including used sanitary napkins, wrappers, gutka packets, and empty liquor and other bottles thrown on top of individual toilet walls. The situation was no different at Dadar station, a junction connecting Western Railway with Central Railway. The overbridge has just two public toilets for women. Neither of them were clean or usable. Ironically, the cleaning schedule on a whiteboard hanging outside the toilet was the cleanest thing in the facility.

Arpita Kadam, a college student, said, "Most women carry a purse, if not a bag. How do they expect us to sit and pee while holding our bags? The toilet is filthy and there is no place to keep a bag inside."

Not even passers-by can escape the overpowering stench emanating from the women's toilet at Churchgate station. If one is unfortunate enough to step inside in case of an emergency, one can only do so while covering the nose. Most commodes were either broken or clogged and did not have a working flush. There was a usable Indian-style toilet, but there was garbage strewn around it. Most toilets were clogged due to used sanitary pads.

According to the Swachh Survekshan results 2019 for Mumbai, released by NGO Praja Foundation, there was only one in four public toilets for females in 2020. Based on the 2011 census, there was one toilet seat per 752 men and 1,820 women currently. This, even as the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) prescribes one toilet for every 100-400 men and 100-200 women respectively.

The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), also known as the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM), received 255 (2019) and 227 (2020) complaints regarding unhygienic toilet conditions. As per the census slum population figures, there was one community toilet seat per 45 men (against the 35 men for one toilet seat prescribed by the SBM) and 36 women (against the 25 prescribed by the SBM).

Another report released by Praja Foundation in April 2018 had stated that as of December 31, 2017, there were 10,778 toilets for men against 3,909 for women across Mumbai, a disparity of 64 per cent. According to the report, for a population of 1,24,42,373, there were 14,687 public toilets and an additional 163 toilets for the differently abled.

A quick check of toilets for women at public hospitals too revealed the unsanitary conditions of the washrooms. Left with no choice, patients and their kin either wait for hours to use a clean washroom or relieve themselves in a paid facility.

There was a long queue in front of the washroom on the first floor of the OPD building at Parel's K E M Hospital, the biggest civic-run hospital in Mumbai. Of three toilets, one was clogged and overflowing, and the second was used to store raw construction materials.

Sudha Kale, a 46-year-old who travelled from suburban Borivali to the hospital to see a gynaecologist, said, "It took me over an hour to reach the hospital and another two hours to see a doctor. My bladder is full but I have to wait in a long queue since there is only one functional toilet."

Many women like Kale, who travel from far-off areas to the hospital for treatment, face the same hassle daily in absence of clean lavatories.

A resident doctor said, “All patients use the OPD washrooms. Due to unhygienic conditions, women are exposed to and can contract infections.”

However, the staff bathrooms were clean. When the reporter went to the upper floor, a senior doctor did not allow her to use the toilet saying that outsiders weren’t allowed to use it. “We can’t allow you to use the toilet. Others will also start coming up here and dirtying it,” said the doctor.

The condition of washrooms for patients was much better at the nearby Tata Memorial Hospital, one of the biggest cancer hospitals in India. The toilets are cleaned regularly despite the high footfall of patients. At B Y L Nair Hospital too, the condition of toilets in the OPD building was not bad.

However, doctors said many patients and their kin were unaware of bathroom etiquette, which led to clogged commodes. “Many patients come from rural areas and don’t know how to use an English seat. They don’t flush properly or throw tissues inside the seat, clogging it,” said a resident medical officer.

These civic hospitals also have paid lavatories, which charge Rs 5 for using the toilet and Rs 20 for a shower. Despite charging for these services, the toilets were soiled and unhygienic.

At the principal seat of the Bombay High Court, situated in the Fort area of South Mumbai, thousands of women lawyers, litigants and court staff deal with acute shortage of public toilets. While there are some toilets in the Bar rooms, the premises of the lawyers’ association, everyone does not have access to these washrooms. Women lawyers and court associates have been demanding at least two public toilets on both ends of each floor to make it convenient for the women at the top court in the state.

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