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Assessing the Availability and Accessibility of Public Toilets in Kamrup Metropolitan District of Assam

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The issue of public toilets and sanitation is a pressing concern in India, particularly in urban areas where the population is dense and growing rapidly. The lack of public toilets is a key obstacle to sanitation improvement in India. There are not enough services in many cities to accommodate the expanding population. In 1970, Dr Bindeshwar Pathak started the “Sulabh Shachalaya” scheme to ensure that people in India have easy access to sanitary public restrooms. Although he has laid the groundwork for India to be free of open defecation, many of the sanitation facilities built as part of the mission have not been maintained and have swiftly deteriorated due to the use of outmoded fixtures and materials. There have been initiatives in recent years by the Indian government to increase access to public toilets and enhance sanitation in the country. The government, under the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM), has been working toward its goal of ending open defecation and improving sanitation in the country since 2014. The SBM focuses on easing access to toilets in public spaces as well as promoting proper sanitation practices, and does not just focus on providing toilets in homes and communities. However, open defecation has not been completely eradicated, and the associated health hazards are yet to be eliminated. In this background, this article seeks to explore the issue of availability and accessibility of public toilets in the Kamrup Metropolitan District of Assam while shedding light on the significance of access to public toilets in India.

Keywords: *Assam, India, Kamrup Metropolitan District, public toilet, sanitation.*

INTRODUCTION

Sanitation is among the most fundamental human needs for health and well-being. However, approximately 673 million people perform open defecation, while 4.2 billion people throughout the world lack access to safely managed sanitation.¹ Sustainable Development Goal 6 aims to ensure the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.² Highlighting the urgency of the issue, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres remarked during the release of the Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020, Today, Sustainable Development Goal 6 is badly off track and is hindering progress on the 2030 Agenda, the realisation of human rights, and the achievement of peace and security around the world.³

The issue of public toilets and sanitation is a pressing concern in India, particularly in urban areas where the population is dense and growing rapidly. One of the major challenges to improving sanitation in India is the lack of public toilets. In many cities, there are simply not enough facilities to meet the needs of the growing population. This lack of access to toilets has serious consequences, as it leads to the practice of open defecation, which spreads diseases and contaminates water sources. In 1970, Dr Bindeshwar Pathak started the Sulabh Shauchalaya programme in India to provide access to clean public restrooms. Dr Pathak led the charge to construct Sulabh Shauchalaya (public toilet) facilities across the country in an effort to eradicate open defecation and make adequate sanitation facilities available for all. While it's true that his efforts have prepared the path for an India free of open defecation, many of the sanitation facilities constructed as part of the mission have not been maintained and have quickly deteriorated due to the use of antiquated fixtures and materials. ⁴In recent years, the government of India has made efforts to address the issue of public toilets and improve sanitation in the country. In 2014, the government launched the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM), which aims to improve sanitation and eliminate open defecation. The focus

¹ 'Goal 6: Ensure access to water and sanitation for all' (*United Nations Sustainable Development Goals*) <<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/water-and-sanitation/>> accessed 17 July 2025

² *Ibid*

³ 'United Nations launches framework to speed up progress on water and sanitation goal' (*United Nations Sustainable Development Goals*, 09 July 2020) <<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2020/07/united-nations-launches-framework-to-speed-up-progress-on-water-and-sanitation-goal/>> accessed 17 July 2025

⁴ 'CURRENT SITUATION OF PUBLIC TOILETS IN INDIA AND WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT IT' (*Tata Steel*, 23 April 2021) <<https://www.nestin.co.in/nest-in-blog/current-situation-of-public-toilets-in-india-and-what-can-be-done-about-it>> accessed 17 July 2025

of the SBM is not limited to providing toilets at the household and community level but also to facilitating toilets in public places, along with the promotion of appropriate sanitation habits and other lifestyle changes. Note that public toilets and community toilets are not the same. While the former is utilised by an amorphous group, the latter is usually constructed for utilisation by particular communities or neighbourhoods. According to Water and Sanitation for the Urban Poor (WSUP), public toilets are characterised by their location in public places, their availability to anyone, and the charge required for each use.⁵

Thus, the Government of India, under the SBM, aims to provide access to public toilets and sanitation facilities to the general public in various public places, such as markets, bus stands, railway stations, religious and tourist sites, public offices, and other areas. The government has allocated rupees one lakh crore for the construction of ten crore toilets all over India. Before SBM, the Indian government implemented various sanitation schemes, including the Rural Sanitation Programme in 1954, the Central Rural Sanitation Programme in 1986, the Total Sanitation Campaign in 1999, and the Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan in 2012.⁶ However, open defecation has not been completely eradicated, and the associated health hazards are yet to be eliminated. In this background, this article aims to explore the issue of availability and accessibility of public toilets in the Kamrup Metropolitan District of Assam (hereinafter Kamrup (M)) while shedding light on the significance of access to public toilets in India.

Henceforth, this article is divided into three sections. It opens with a discussion of the judicial outlook on the importance of public toilets in India (Section Two) and goes on to examine the condition of public toilets in Kamrup (M) (Section Three). The Concluding Section provides an overview of the issue of public toilets in Kamrup (M) in particular and India in general, and provides suggestions to address the issue holistically.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is based in Kamrup (M), a region located in the state of Assam in north-eastern India. The district has a total population of 12,60,419 according to the 2011 census, with a

⁵ Dorothy Peprah et al., 'Public Toilets and Their Customers in Low-Income Accra, Ghana' (2015) 27(2) *Environment and Urbanization* <<https://www.scribd.com/document/483548662/0956247815595918>> accessed 17 July 2025

⁶ 'About SBMG' (Ministry of Jal Shakti) <<https://swachhbharatmission.gov.in/sbmcms/index.htm>> accessed 17 July 2025

male population of 647,585 and a female population of 606,353.⁷ The district was chosen because of its sanitation-related concerns and difficulties. As Kamrup (M) is the capital district of the state of Assam, it is significant in the context of sanitation due to concerns around availability, accessibility, and maintenance of public toilets, amongst others.

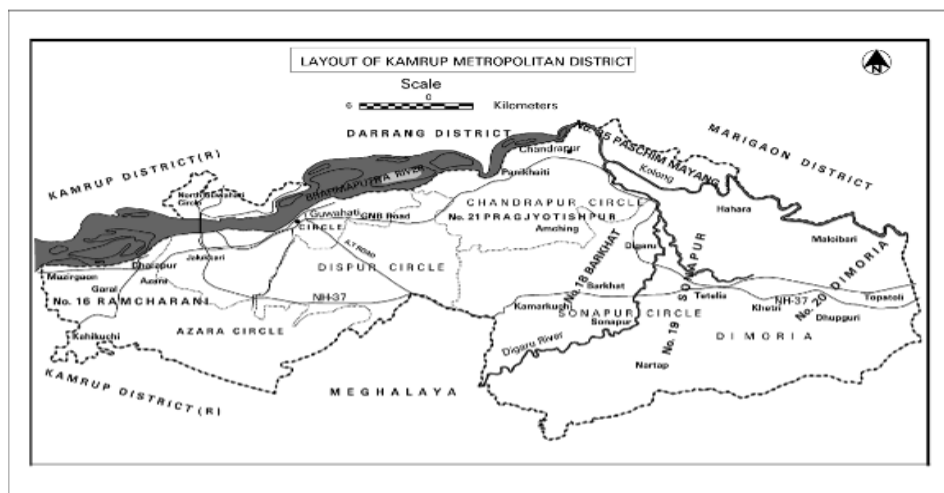


Figure 1.1: Map of Kamrup Metropolitan District⁸

A literature review coupled with a field study was carried out to provide qualitative as well as quantitative contributions to the present study. The literature review method was adopted to develop the theoretical basis of the study, mainly to analyse the judicial approach to the issue of public toilets in India, as well as to examine official data related to public toilets in Kamrup (M). To assess the current condition of public toilet facilities in Kamrup (M), the study relied on both quantitative and qualitative data.

The quantitative data were obtained through statistical analysis of responses to a structured questionnaire, which explored the availability of public toilet amenities and the specific needs and demands of users. The questionnaire addressed both social and physical dimensions of public toilet usage. A total of 50 residents of Kamrup (M), selected randomly, participated in the survey, comprising 27 adult males and 23 adult females between the ages of 18 and 65. The qualitative data were gathered through direct observation of existing public toilet facilities in the district.

⁷ 'District Disaster Management Authority (DDMA) Kamrup Metro' (Government of Assam Kamrup Metropolitan District, 14 June 2024) <<https://kamrupmetro.assam.gov.in/departments/district-disaster-management-authority-ddma-kamrup-metro>> accessed 17 July 2025

⁸ *Ibid*

SIGNIFICANCE OF PUBLIC TOILETS IN INDIA: JUDICIAL APPROACH

In recent years, the judiciary has played a significant role in addressing the issue of sanitation and public toilets in India. For instance, in the Ratlam Municipality case,⁹ it was recognised by the Supreme Court of India (hereinafter the Supreme Court) that the right to sanitation is derived from the fundamental right to life. Similarly, in the Virender Gaur case,¹⁰ the Supreme Court observed that Article 21 protects the right to life as a fundamental right.

The enjoyment of life and its attainment, including their right to life with human dignity, encompass within their ambit, the protection and preservation of the environment, an ecological balance free from pollution of air and water, and sanitation, without which life cannot be enjoyed. Likewise, in the LK Koolwal case,¹¹ The High Court of Rajasthan was of the view that maintenance of health, preservation of sanitation, and the environment fall within the purview of Article 21 of the Constitution, as they adversely affect the life of the citizen and amount to slow poisoning and reduce the life of the citizen because of the hazards created if not checked.¹² Thus, in India, the right to sanitation is justiciable as it is part of the fundamental right to life.

Moreover, while addressing the issue of public toilets for women walking on the streets raised in the case of Milun Saryajani v Pune Municipal Corporation and Ors,¹³ The Bombay High Court emphasised the significance of access to clean and hygienic toilets for living a dignified life in the following words: *“The Supreme Court has, in several cases, given Article 21 a much wider meaning, to include the right to livelihood, a better standard of life, hygienic conditions at workplace as well as at leisure. No human being can live with dignity unless there are facilities to maintain basic hygiene. The right conferred by Article 21 cannot be meaningful if facilities of clean toilets and hygienic toilets are not provided to a woman walking on the streets. She needs these facilities at public places like Railway Stations, Bus Stands, Banks, and Public Offices like State Government Offices/Municipal Offices. Thus, what flows from Article 47 of the Constitution of India and the provisions of the Maharashtra Municipal Corporation Act and Mumbai Municipal Corporation Act, is that public health is of paramount importance and that it is the duty of the State and the*

⁹ *Municipal Council, Ratlam v Shri Vardhichand* AIR 1980 SC 1622

¹⁰ *Virendra Gaur and Ors v State of Haryana and Ors* (1995) 2 SCC 577

¹¹ *LK Koolwal v State of Rajasthan & Ors* AIR 1988 Raj 2

¹² *Ibid*

¹³ *Milun Saryajani through Editor Geetali Vinayak Manjrekar v Pune Municipal Corporation and Ors* (2016) (2) ABR

Corporations to ensure that public latrines, urinals and similar conveniences are constructed, maintained and kept in a hygienic condition. However, the State/Corporations will be entitled to receive reasonable charges for the maintenance of the facilities."

Additionally, the court pointed out that, for various reasons, including biological ones, the need for access to toilets by women is greater than that of men, and the nature of the problems of accessibility and availability of public toilets for women is universal. While indicating the unsatisfactory condition of public toilet facilities in India, the court observed that the availability of such facilities is insignificant in comparison to the population of women in the country. Also, the poor infrastructure and unhygienic conditions of such toilets worsen the toilet issue.

Thus, the court held that it is the basic right of women to have access to safe and hygienic toilet facilities in public places. The availability of such facilities is directly linked to the right to life and dignity of women. Moreover, hygienic public toilet facilities contribute to the public health and betterment of the community. It is the obligation of the state authorities to provide clean public toilets to women to improve the condition of public health. Accordingly, the court has issued orders to construct public toilets in various parts of the country and to ensure their maintenance and proper functioning.

Similarly, in *P. Saravanan v Union of India*,¹⁴ the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court emphasised the importance of public toilets in India in the light of Articles 21, 47, and 21(A) of the Constitution of India, in the following words: *"A neat and hygienic toilet is a right of the citizen... Coupled with the rights guaranteed under Articles 21, 47 and 21(A) of the Constitution of India and the mandate on the local bodies to provide public toilets in a neat and clean condition, the State must provide neat and hygienic public toilets to its people."*

Accordingly, the court has directed the state authorities to provide an adequate number of public toilets throughout the state, as well as to involve NGOS with local authorities in their maintenance. The court has also instructed the concerned authorities to sensitise the public about the proper usage of the public toilets and to put in place the proper complaint

¹⁴ *P Saravanan v Union of India* W.P (MD) No 4959/2019

mechanisms and monitoring mechanisms for the clean, safe, and hygienic maintenance of the toilets.

Likewise, while addressing the scope of the right to life to cover the right to sanitation and the nature of the duty of the state to provide facilities related to sanitation on the highways in India, in *National Highway Projects in the State of Bihar v The State of Bihar*,¹⁵ Patna High Court stated: *"Sanitation is personal and private, inextricably linked to human dignity. At the same time, sanitation has an essential public health dimension. In this regard, sanitation is not only about an individual's right to access a toilet or latrine. Inadequate sanitation leads to contamination of the environment, public spaces, and water bodies through faeces and wastewater. Therefore, contamination negatively impacts public health and the life and well-being of everyone in the community, affecting their human rights to health, life, food, and a healthy environment."*

Thus, the court emphasised the state authorities' responsibility to provide basic sanitation-related facilities to the people on the highways to prevent open defecation and other sanitation-related problems and highlighted the significance of the right to sanitation as: *"...that right to sanitation has been virtually accepted as a fundamental right like the water right, right to health, right to a healthy environment, right to education, and right to dignity, directly related to the right to sanitation. Bare necessities of life include proper sanitation facilities, as the practice of open defecation or a life with a polluted drinking water source and environment cannot be considered as a life of dignity as understood in the context of Right to life under the constitution."*¹⁶

Hence, while underlining the status of sanitation as a fundamental right, the Indian judiciary also recognised the connection between access to toilet facilities and the right to sanitation on many occasions. Moreover, as discussed above, the judiciary has stressed the importance of having access to clean toilets in public places as a matter of the right to life and dignity.

ANALYSIS OF AVAILABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY OF PUBLIC TOILET FACILITIES IN THE KAMRUP METROPOLITAN DISTRICT OF ASSAM

As per official data, Guwahati Municipal Corporation (GMC) recently constructed 32 toilets in different parts of Kamrup (M) in Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) mode. Considering the public's need, such toilets are primarily built-in marketplaces and beneath flyovers. The

¹⁵ *National Highway Projects in the State of Bihar v The State of Bihar* Civil Writ Jurisdiction Case No 8900/2020

¹⁶ *Ibid*

number of toilets available in the district is as follows: Fancy Bazar-20 seats; Nepali Mandir-2 seats; Khanapara-6 seats; Bhangagarh-4 seats.¹⁷ However, during the visit to Kamrup (M), the researchers observed that the condition of most of the public toilets was not satisfactory and that those toilets did not have basic sanitation facilities. Another observation made by the researchers was that, though on Google Maps, public toilets are shown in certain places, in reality, they are not there. Hence, there are discrepancies between the data and the actual availability of public toilets in the district. Nevertheless, the new public toilets constructed in PPE mode do have sanitation facilities and are well-maintained. Also, such toilets have an innovative component of on-site disposal through bio-digester tanks for the ecological and sanitary decomposition of the waste.¹⁸

To understand the availability and accessibility of public toilet facilities in the district, the following section incorporates the analysis of the data collected from 50 respondents residing in Kamrup (M), using the questionnaire method. The data analysis is described in numerical as well as standard writing formats with the help of pie-charts. The data analysis is split into two parts: the frequency of the questions posed to the respondents, which comprises the first part, and the analysis of the responses they provided, which is presented in the second part, together with the percentage of those responses displayed in pie charts.

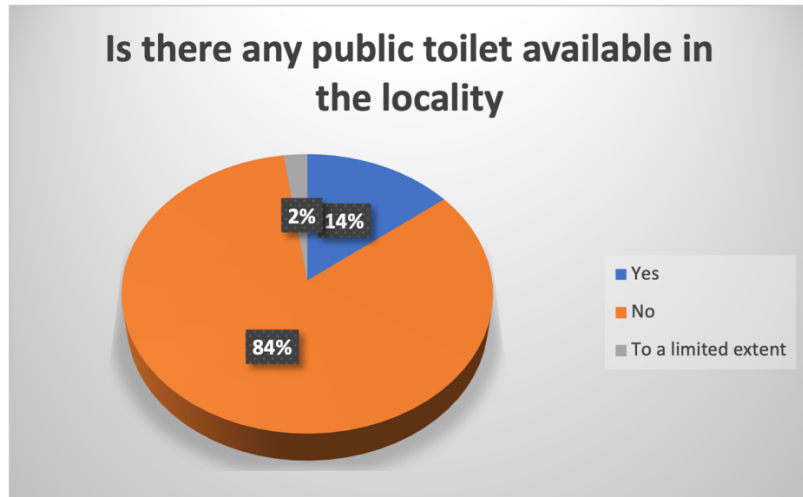
(i) Is there any public toilet available in the locality?

The frequency of question (i) as well as the percentage of respondents' responses are shown in the table below:

	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	7	14
No	42	84
To a limited extent	1	2

¹⁷ 'Individual Household Latrines' (Government of Assam Guwahati Municipal Corporation, 18 July 2025) <<https://gmc.assam.gov.in/information-services/detail/toilets>> accessed 19 July 2025

¹⁸ *Ibid*



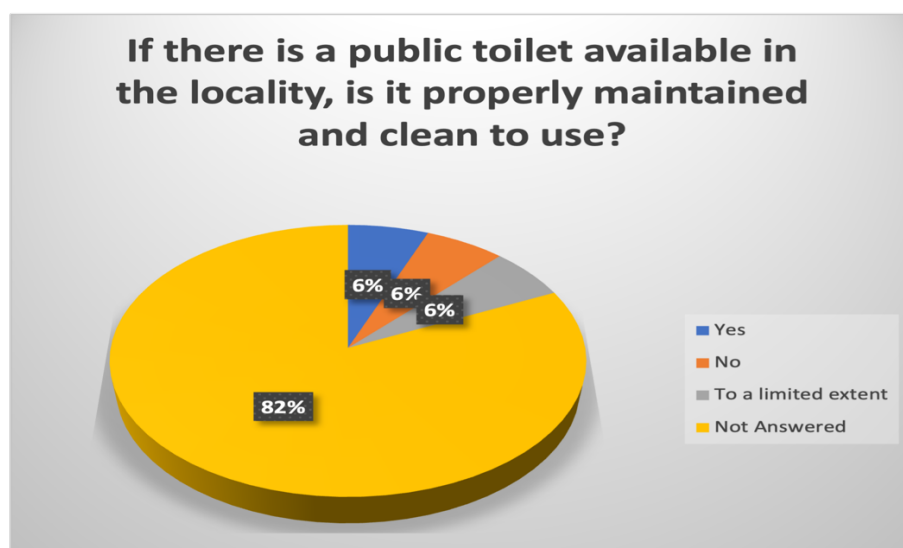
As shown in the figure, only 14% of respondents confirmed the availability of public toilets in their locality, whereas 84% confirmed the non-availability of public toilets in their locality, and 2% gave a mixed response, stating that public toilets are available to a limited extent, implying that even though they are available, toilets are not easily accessible.

This analysis reveals an alarming state of availability and accessibility of public toilets. The non-availability of such facilities indicates flaws in the sanitation governance in the district, which goes against the universal access to sanitation norm.

(ii) If there is a public toilet available in the locality, is it properly maintained and clean to use?

The frequency of question (ii) as well as the percentage of respondents' responses are shown in the table below:

	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	3	6
No	3	6
To a limited extent	3	6
Not Answered	41	82

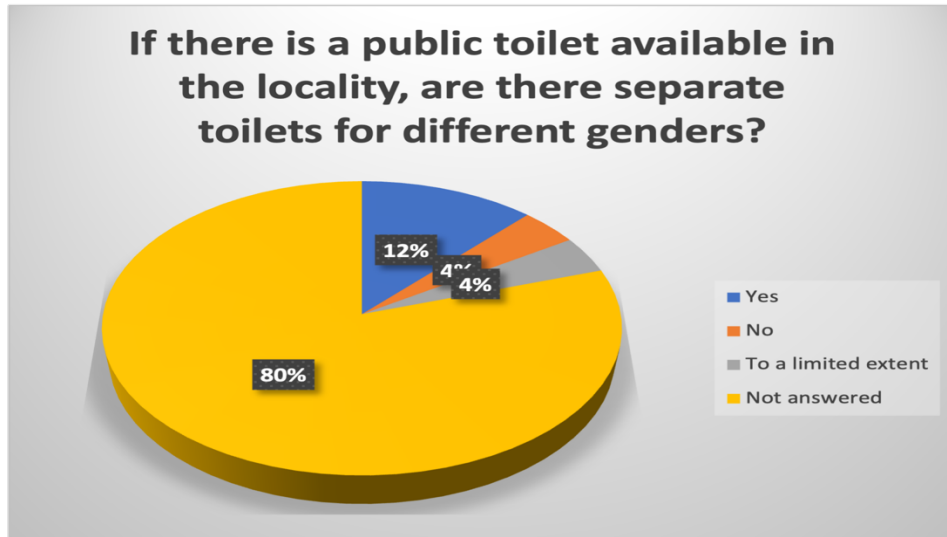


This figure shows that the public toilets available at different localities in the district are properly maintained and clean to use, as per 6% of the respondents; 6% gave mixed responses, indicating that the condition is not satisfactory, and 6% said that the public toilets are neither properly maintained nor clean to use. 82% of respondents did not give any answer to this question, which means that they do not have access to public toilets in their localities.

(iii) If there is a public toilet available in the locality, are there separate toilets for different genders?

The frequency of question (iii) as well as the percentage of respondents' responses are shown in the table below:

	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	6	12
No	2	4
To a limited extent	2	4
Not answered	40	80



As shown in the figure, 12% of respondents said that there is a provision for separate toilets for different genders in public toilets; 4% said that there is no provision for separate toilets for different genders; and 4% said that it is available to a limited extent, which means that even if it is available, it is not satisfactory. 80% of respondents did not respond to this question, implying that they do not have access to public restrooms in their localities.

(iv) If there is a public toilet available in the locality, are soap and water available at the toilet?

The frequency of question (iv) as well as the percentage of respondents' responses are shown in the table below.

	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	3	6
No	3	6
To a limited extent	2	4
Not answered	42	84

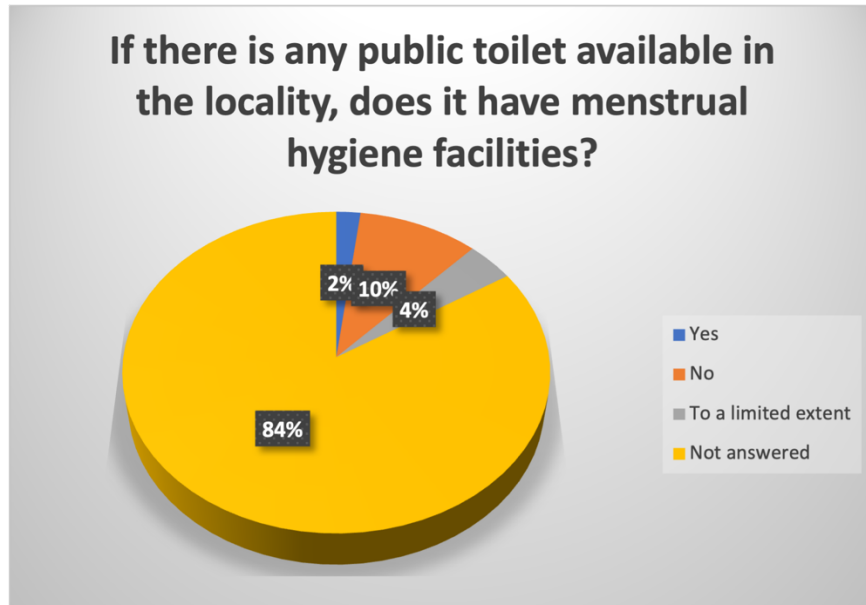


As shown in the figure, according to 6% of respondents, soap and water facilities are available in the public toilets; however, 6% of respondents denied the availability of soap and water facilities in the public toilets. 4% of respondents mentioned that it is available to a limited extent, which means that even though it is available, it is not satisfactory. 84% of respondents did not give any answer to this question, which means that they do not have access to public toilets in their localities, hence this question does not apply to them.

(v) If there is any public toilet available in the locality, does it have menstrual hygiene facilities?

The frequency of question (v) as well as the percentage of respondents' responses are shown in the table below.

	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	1	2
No	5	10
To a limited extent	2	4
Not answered	42	84



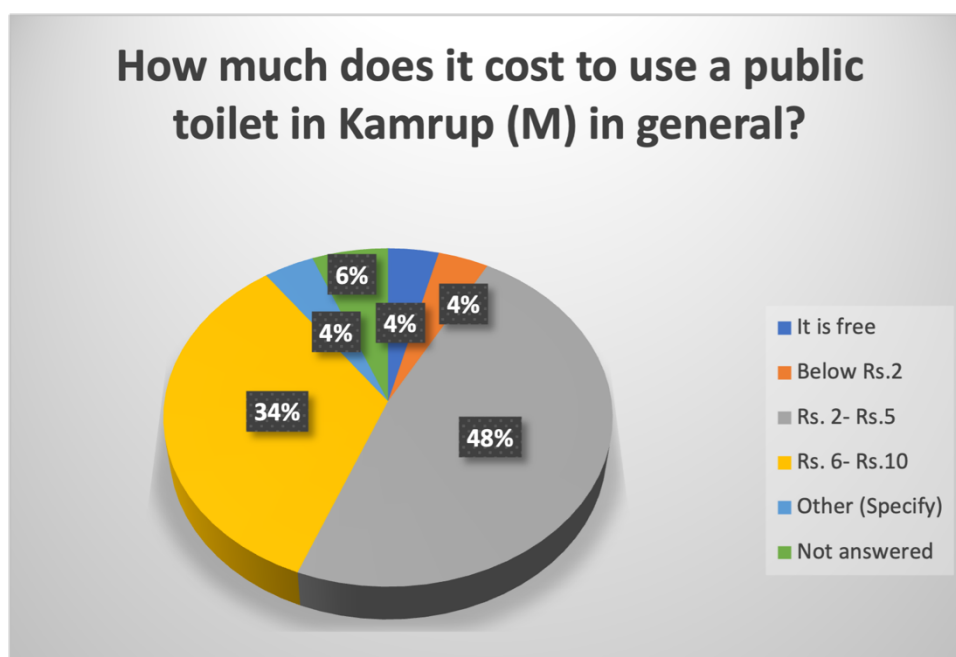
As shown in the figure, according to 2% of respondents, menstrual hygiene facilities are available in the public toilets; however, 10% of respondents denied the availability of menstrual hygiene facilities in the toilets. 4% of respondents said that it is available to a limited extent, which means that even though it is available, it is not satisfactory. 84% of respondents did not respond to this question, indicating that they do not have access to public toilets in their communities or that some of them, who are not women, are unaware of the availability of such facilities, making this question irrelevant to them.

(vi) How much does it cost to use a public toilet in Kamrup (M) in general?

The frequency of question (vi) as well as the percentage of respondents' responses are shown in the table below.

	Frequency	Percentage
It is free	2	4
Below Rs.2	2	4
Rs. 2 - Rs. 5	24	48
Rs. 6 - Rs. 10	17	34
Other (Specify)	2	4

Not answered	3	6
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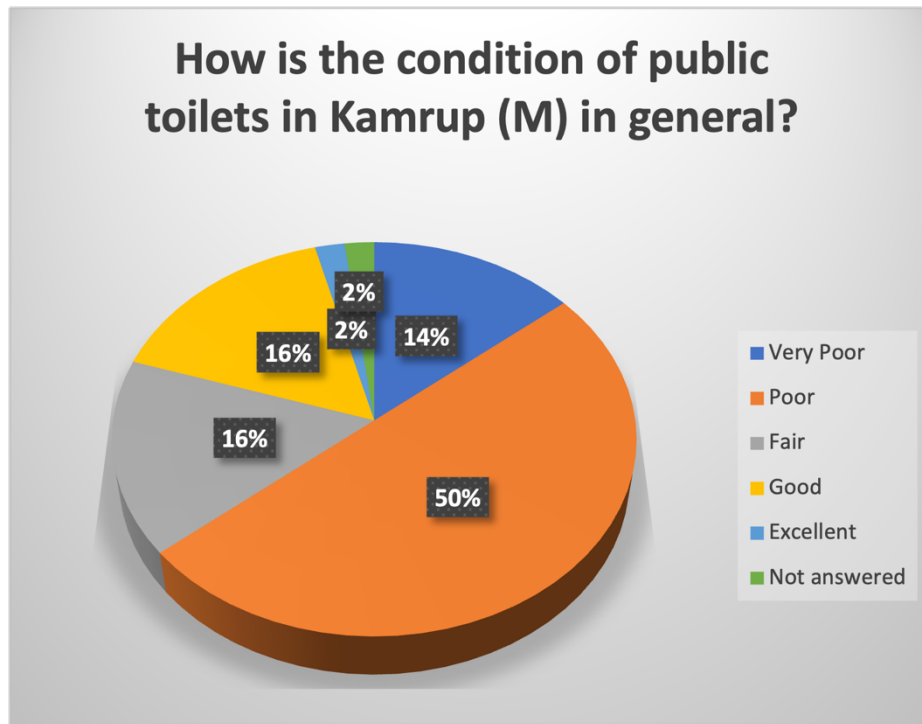
When respondents were asked about the cost to use a public toilet in Kamrup (M) in general, 4% said that it was free, 4% said that it cost below Rs. 2, 48% said that it cost around Rs. 2-5, and 34 % said that it cost around Rs. 6-10. However, 4% did not specify the amount, and 6% did not give any response to this question. This indicates that they are unaware of the cost of using public toilets.

(vii) How is the condition of public toilets in Kamrup (M) in general?

The frequency of question (vii) as well as the percentage of respondents' responses are shown in the table below.

	Frequency	Percentage
Very Poor	7	14
Poor	25	50
Fair	8	16
Good	8	16

Excellent	1	2
Not answered	1	2



The above figure shows that the condition of public toilets in Kamrup (M) in general is very poor, according to 14% of respondents, poor according to 50% of respondents, fair according to 16% of respondents, good according to 16% of respondents, and excellent according to only 2% of respondents. Nevertheless, 2% of respondents did not give any answer to this question, which means that they are not aware of the condition of the public toilets in the city, as they do not use public toilets as such.

It depicts the poor condition of the public toilet facilities in the district, as more than half of the respondents have shown their dissatisfaction with the availability of such facilities.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATION

There has been a lot of criticism levelled against public toilet facilities in India. Generally, public toilets in India are dirty and unsanitary for both men and women. It is unquestionably unhealthy and more dangerous for women due to the physical contact necessary with such facilities. As a result of widespread ignorance about the importance of maintaining clean toilets as well as unhygienic behavioural practices of the public, toilets in India in public

places remain in a dismal state. Though the judiciary and the government of India have been making enormous efforts to provide access to safe and clean public toilet facilities to everyone, much work remains to be done to ensure that all people in India have access to such facilities. In addition to the construction of more public toilets, there is a need for better maintenance and management of existing facilities.

With respect to the condition of public toilet facilities in Kamrup (M), though official data reflects the availability of public toilets in many parts of the district, on observation, it is found that public toilets are either not available or not maintained properly in many places. Also, from the above quantitative analysis, it is clear that Kamrup (M) lacks the availability of an adequate number of public toilet facilities in the district. The non-availability of such facilities is a public health concern for the people in the district, especially for women. It is also found that many people don't use the public toilets due to improper infrastructure, unhygienic conditions, and poor maintenance, which make the toilets a breeding ground for bacteria. As mentioned in the discussion, the gender dimension of public toilets is another issue; sometimes, even when a toilet facility is present, it is not separate for different genders. Another grey area is the non-availability of water and hand-washing facilities in public toilets, which aggravates the sanitation and hygiene issues. Overall, the condition of the public toilets in the district seems to be poor and requires special attention from the state authorities.

In conclusion, the lack of public toilets and inadequate sanitation in Kamrup (M) is a major concern that needs to be addressed holistically. Ensuring that all people have access to clean and safe toilet facilities is not only a basic human right; it is also essential for public health and the overall well-being of society. Further efforts are needed to address the root causes of the problem and implement effective solutions at the local level. Moreover, the public health consequences of open defecation practices must be widely publicised, and programmes must be implemented to teach people how to properly use public toilets and practise good hygiene. Building smart sanitation facilities throughout the district can support the efforts of the many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and government agencies that already run such awareness campaigns.