

What Does Toilet Paper Teach Us about Our Defecation Habits?

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By



Illustration by Bicram Rijal

An Australian photographer embarks on a jungle expedition in search of a "critically endangered species." With a Canon camera on his shoulder and a pair of khaki shorts, he walks through a forest, occasionally stepping in puddles and crossing creeks. "It is harder to find than I thought," he says, looking straight into the camera. "There is, there is, there is! Come, come, come, come!" He gets super excited. And he points to something, before concluding: "It's a healthy one too. Wow! That's amazing!" Then he directs his long camera zoom towards the "species," takes a few shots of it and shakes his head in disbelief: "It's in perfect condition...critically rare, endangered. Wow! Can't believe it! Wow!" Then there is a close-up shot of the critically endangered species. It turns out the species is none other than a roll of toilet paper. The photographer on the expedition is Robert Irwin, a teenage conservationist and TV personality, and son of late "crocodile hunter" Steve Irwin. He shares the [satirical video](#) on April 1st

through his Instagram account with his more than 2 million followers. “April Fools!” he reveals at the end of the video.

Toilet paper may not be a “critically endangered species,” but it has become a scarce item in our pandemic times. In Canada, United States and beyond, [the news about the scarcity of toilet paper](#) broke out well before the health crisis of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic unfolded. Toilet paper was one of the first four items that went out of stock—both online and in-store—along with surgical masks, hand sanitizer, and cleaning products in the West.

I have been following COVID-19 coverage very closely and noticed how toilet paper—a mundane everyday object in the West—has become an artifact revealing a myriad of social practices and processes of the contemporary moment shaped very much by the pandemic itself. Its manifestations range from an [object of humor](#) to the consumer [acts of panic-buying](#). And it has become a subject of the [Internet memes](#), [online trolls](#), incessant news commentary, and even global celebrities’ “[toilet paper challenge](#).” An ordinary item so closely associated with private bodily practice—defecation—toilet paper has brought to the public spotlight humanity’s intimate habits and mannerisms, which remain a taboo subject in most societies.

Defecation habits in cross-cultural contexts

How did a relatively invisible object of private life become a topic of global discussion during the emergent COVID-19 pandemic? This is a question that has lingered in my mind since I first read the news about the toilet paper shortage. Indeed, toilet paper is now an indispensable and essential item of contemporary life in the West. But it was merely a disposable and “taboo” object when it was first invented [some 160 years ago in the United States](#). To understand why and how toilet paper has become a potent object of neoliberal modernity, we need to discuss a brief history of the object itself, as well as our defecation practices and their transformation over time.

Let’s first touch on the taboo surrounding defecation. The taboos around defecation habits and excreta are specific to cultural contexts. In the West, for example, while words like “penis” and “sex” are easily pronounced in public, the term “shit” receives heavy scrutiny and censorship. So much so that, according to author Dave Praeger (2007), nobody wanted to ask for toilet paper by its name until the early 20th century. “It was so taboo that you couldn’t even talk about the product,” he writes. Up until the 1920s, the [manufacturer would not put its tagline on the roll of toilet paper fearing the public embarrassment](#). Praeger also notes that “the taboos surrounding poop are society’s response to its physical properties: it

stinks, disgusts us, and comes from our private parts.”

In Nepal, things around taboo work quite differently. The topic of sex is an exponentially bigger taboo than defecation. One can easily pronounce *gu* (shit) in a public setting—even in front of elders—but no one says *lando* (penis) in a public conversation. “*Gu aayo, gaun aayo*” (We have reached the village because there is shit around everywhere) was a common expression among those visiting the rural villages until a few years ago, in referring to a pertinent sanitation problem characterized by open defecation. In the absence of toilets in private homes, people used roadside, riverbank, backyard, agriculture field, bushes, creek, forest, etc. as places for defecation. It was only September last year that [Nepal declared itself an open defecation free \(ODF\) country](#), after claiming that every single household had built a toilet. The declaration came two years after the original deadline of 2017, which had been pushed back due to the devastating earthquakes that hit Nepal in April and May of 2015. However celebratory the achievement may have been for the Nepali government, the [questions on the legitimacy of such a claim](#) still linger post-declaration.

Toilet paper as potent object

For the most part of human history, people have used whatever that was available in front of them to clean themselves after defecation: rocks, corncobs, soil, hay, grass, dry cow or buffalo dung, sticks, moss, paper scraps, rags, wood chips, leaves, water, sponge, etc. Toilet paper and flushing systems are only recent additions to the defecation habitus in the West. For example, [toilet paper was not a commonly used item in the United States until the 1920s](#).

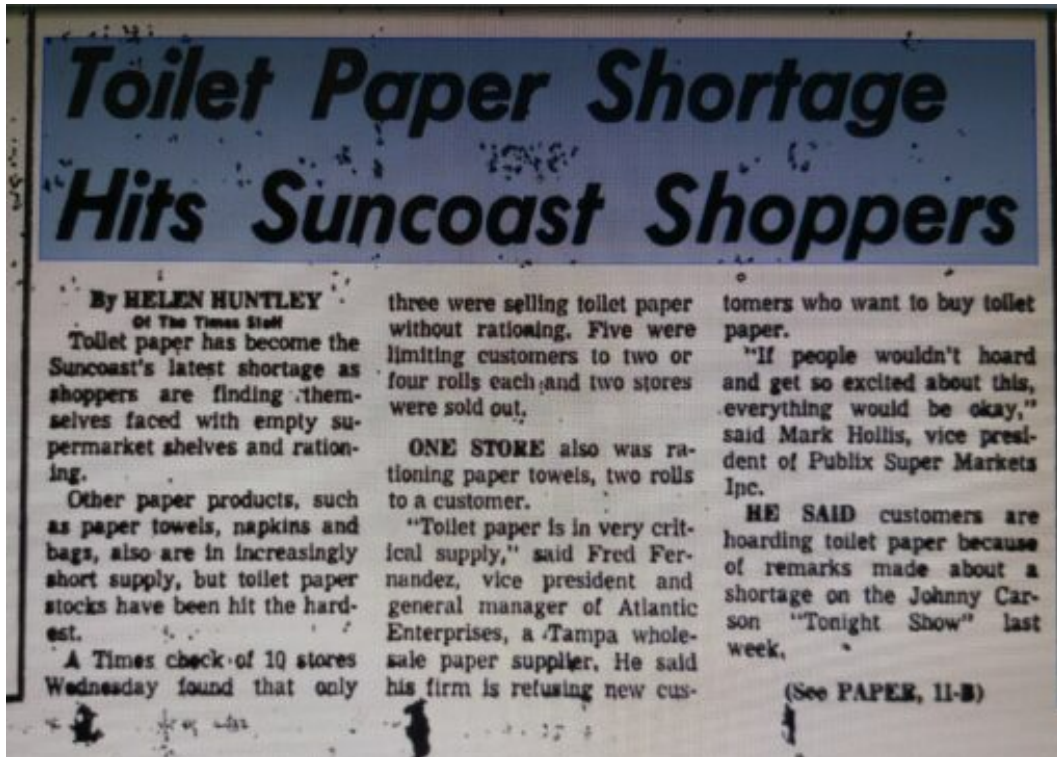


Photo by Bicram Rijal

Up until the late 19th century, outhouse toilets were common sanitary infrastructure in the West. It was only in the early 20th century when indoor toilets became the norm. But, for the most part, in the absence of modern plumbing and flushing systems, they were not really the modern-day toilets, but were rather called [“earth closets,”](#) an equivalent of today’s composting toilet. Instead of water, they used ash or dirt to cover human waste and absorb its foul smell. According to Brian M. Sipe (1988), “[t]he resulting earth and manure mixture could then be thoroughly mixed, dried, and reused as many as seven times before finally being utilized as fertilizer.” He adds that the companies producing the earth closets advertised them for saving both soil and money.

With the introduction of modern plumbing and the manufacture of soft tissues, toilet paper seemed to have become a commercially produced household item only by the 1930s in North America. However, within the next 40 years, the apparently “embarrassing” object would transform into an indispensable item of everyday life. For example, by the 1970s, it had already become one of the most essential items in the United States, so [much](#) so that comedian [Johnny Carson’s joke about a fictional toilet paper shortage](#) in December 1973 led to its actual shortage [for as long as four months](#). Writing in the *New York Times* on Feb 03, 1974, Andrew H. Malcolm noted: “...it was a shortage that need never have been. For the toilet paper shortage was a rumor run wild in a nation that has recently

become geared to expect shortages in items considered absolute necessities." A relatively unknown item until a century ago, toilet paper has now become a potent cultural and economic artifact, with some estimates claiming it to be a [31 billion dollar per year industry](#) in the US alone.



News coverage of toilet paper shortage in St. Petersburg Times, Dec. 27, 1973.

Cultural and ideological message of neoliberal modernity

In the contemporary West, the use of toilet paper and flushing system bears a powerful cultural and ideological message of modernity. As the toilet increasingly helped defecation become a private act – as opposed to the collective sociality embedded in the practices of open defecation – the sanitary modernity imagines the radical separation between the body and its product. The Western modernist and progressivist notion of sanitation embodies the idea that to become modern is to suppress and to feel repugnant about one's own privy manners—i.e. defecation, urination, farting, bathing, to name some. Such constructs calls for suppressing, if not outright erasing, the senses of vision, smell, and touch in relation to human excreta. Margaret Morgan (2002) points out the role of modern sanitary infrastructure in the sensory erasure of our bodily product as she writes: "Plumbing, with every sanitary flush, with every gleaming knob and valve, every glint on the surface of the porcelain, is meant to allow you efficiently to forget about the fact of your personal self."

In fact, as historical sociologist Norbert Elias (2000) reminds us, the contemporary habits are a result of a long “civilizing process.” Even in the 16th century, European society had already started practicing privacy in relation to defecation habits as he writes that “it does not befit a modest, honorable man to prepare to relieve nature in the presence of other people.” By the 18th century, he notes, Europeans were encouraged to relieve themselves, urinate and fart in secrecy such that “as far as natural needs are concerned, it is proper (even for children) to satisfy them only where one cannot be seen.”

In a way, relatively shorter and lesser sensory engagement with excreta, with the help of toilet paper, wipes, and flushing, is seen as a speedy pathway toward sanitary modernity. Therefore, the contemporary mantra of Western sanitation involves doing one’s business, wiping, flushing, and moving on. While cleaning with water after defecation is still common in many parts of the world, wiping is essentially the only way to go in the developed West. And such sanitary practice embodies not only the cultural values of comfort and convenience, but also the neoliberal ideologies of individuality and privacy.

Toilets and new subjectivity

Partly due to the globalization of sanitary ideology in recent times, countries where open defecation is still a massive problem show a lot of panic around the issue. As Nepal’s recent toilet-building campaigns suggest, in the broader spectrum of sanitation, open defecation not only represents incivility, immorality, non-citizenship, indignity, and an impediment to progress and prosperity, but it is also conceived to be a root cause of public health problems. When there were outbreaks of cholera and other waterborne diseases in the recent past, open defecation was among the first factors to be blamed as a possible cause.



Advertising board with a sanitation message at a government office building in Dolakha district in central Nepal. Photo by Bicram Rijal

Since 2011, Nepal's state-led sanitation campaigns have deemed open defecation a “social crime” to force people to build toilets in order to achieve the national goal of ODF. In some areas, until the ODF declaration last year, people who did not have toilets at home were denied citizenship cards and other state-delivered services, including the much-needed government grant for home rebuilding in the aftermath of 2015 earthquakes.

Ongoing toilet paper shortage: a cultural interpretation

One may wonder why the aisles of bathroom tissues are all empty during the COVID-19 pandemic. Why are panicked buyers in the West hoarding toilet paper? While psychologists are blaming individuals' “[herd mentality](#),” others are calling it a problem in the [supply chain](#) instead.

However, as an anthropologist, I think that the scarcity of toilet papers has got to do primarily with the culture of defecation. When wiping becomes the only habit to deal with defecation—and reproduced as such by specific toilet training, toilet technology design, and an assemblage of sanitary infrastructure, including sewers and water supply—it is difficult to get rid of heavy reliance on tissues. Both private homes and public buildings in the West offer no alternative to wiping. It is quite unlike what I would observe in Nepal, where most people in rural villages still know nothing about toilet paper. In most household toilets, people keep a plastic bucket and a jar to use water for cleaning after business. Even the urban “commodes”

(raised toilets) in private homes have bidet sprayers attached to them for washing *that* body part after defecation. When I asked my family and friends in Nepal a few days ago about the shortage of stuff during the total lockdown of the country due to COVID-19, they did not mention toilet paper, but cooking gas, petrol, and [vegetables](#). In other words, toilet paper is not an “essential” item yet for most Nepali households, unlike here in North America.



An empty aisle inside Safeway store in Kensington Square Centre, Burnaby, BC on March 17, 2020. Photo by Bicram Rijal

In Western societies, where defecation habits are increasingly private and wiping offers a refrain from the tactile experience of “matter out of place,” bodily waste—toilet paper is ingrained in people’s minds as a savior of their privacy and dignity, and an assurance for physical and mental comfort. So, the hoarding of toilet paper is guided by a peculiar, culturally and contextually shaped psychology—not irrationality, as most

psychologists would suggest—in which people fear that their long-practiced privacy and convenience may be compromised or lost without mundane tissues.

In his [recent piece](#), anthropologist Stephen E. Nash interprets panic-buying of toilet paper as “an act of identity construction, a way of defining ourselves as individuals and as a group,” referring to a characteristic of a consumerist society. He thinks that panic buying is a demonstration of “economic virility in a time of crisis.”

It is certain that several other explanations are possible for this emergent behavior. However, I argue that the historical, cross-cultural and processual perspectives will be helpful in offering a thick understanding of the intricate link between a mundane paper and crucial embodied practices of everyday life.

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