

India needs a sewage system, not free toilets

A policy announcement about the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA) in the 2018 budget speech barely received any attention. Referring to the 60 million toilets already constructed, the finance minister declared the existing programme a success, and announced the intention to construct an additional 20 million toilets allotting a budget of Rs17,843 crore to this end. This has attracted little criticism or praise. The reason is that Indians are familiar with this policy; they are reminded of it daily while paying the Swachh Bharat cess. And there is little controversy over the need for greater levels of sanitation. Overall, this seems like a well-intentioned and sensible initiative.

Except for one thing. Access to free toilets has not helped resolve open defecation in India. And the SBA is unlikely to succeed in its primary task of eliminating open defecation by October 2019. The main reason is that Indians don't want free toilets, they want sewage systems. India has far higher levels of open defecation than other countries of the same GDP (gross domestic product) per capita. For example, India has a higher GDP per capita than Bangladesh, but in Bangladesh only 8.4% households defecate in the open, compared to 55% in India. Basic latrines are not that expensive, and people in countries far poorer than India build inexpensive latrines to avoid defecating in the open. Typically, as nations get wealthier, open defecation decreases. Despite increases in GDP per capita, and increase in latrine availability through the SBA, India has witnessed little decrease in open defecation.

Why do Indians, even with accessible toilets, go in the open? Especially when open defecation is killing infants, making children sick, stunting their growth.

Diane Coffey and Dean Spears' recent book, *Where India Goes*, argues that the problem is not just one of access to toilets. Even when toilets are provided for free by the government, Indians prefer defecating in the open to using basic latrines. The latrines provided by governments are often used for storage, washing clothes, and as play areas—everything except the intended use. The key reason for this is that basic latrines that need to be emptied out manually or pumped by simple machines are unacceptable to higher caste Hindus. It is considered polluting to the individual and the home, and historically associated with untouchability. The perceptions of ritual purity are particularly prevalent and persistent in rural India, with consequently the highest level of open defecation in the world.

So, Indian policymakers need to rethink the solution to this problem. It is not just a matter of access but a problem of perceptions of pollution, ritual purity, and caste. This in no way suggests that one should endorse the nonsensical and irrational caste perceptions and practices that are slowly and steadily killing and stunting Indian children. However, deeply entrenched cultural contexts must be taken into account for successful policy outcomes. India needs to change perceptions of ritual purity through education and awareness in rural areas. And if it is not possible to change perceptions quickly, India needs to think of policy solutions that can work around the perverse caste perceptions. Or pursue both paths simultaneously.

One solution is to change the SBA from a scheme providing free toilets, to one encouraging and enabling local governments to construct sewage systems. A toilet that is not connected to a functional sewage system needs to be pumped and transported, which runs counter to perceptions of ritual purity. A toilet that flushes away human waste into the sewage and waste management system solves the problem. If there is a functional sewage system, it is relatively low cost for households to build a toilet in every home that is connected to the sewage system. At the current levels of development in India, a much smaller proportion of the population will actually need a government subsidy to construct a toilet.

Building a sewage system is no easy task and raises classic collective action problems. All citizens do not face the costs equally when some streets and neighbourhoods are dug up for years on end. But everyone reaps the benefits of having a functional and sanitary waste disposal system. So this is a problem of concentrated costs and dispersed benefits, which leads to policy inaction.

There is a secondary problem of political incentives when it comes to building sewage systems. It takes years to build sewage systems, and local politicians face all the costs upfront, and the benefits are far in the future. Disgruntled citizens and voters complain about the digging of neighbourhoods for years, causing much nuisance to their daily lives. However, a different legislator or corporator may reap the benefits of better health outcomes far in the future. So, this is also a problem of immediate costs and distant benefits.

Both these problems essentially act as disincentives of the political class to take action to solve the sanitation problem. Providing free toilets is easier to achieve, and also easier to measure as a success at the distribution level, if one ignores the fact that they are not used for the intended purpose.

The SBA has minimal chance of success in the near future. Even if the government builds free toilets without any leakage or corruption, India will at best have 80 million new toilets that a large proportion of Indians do not want to use, and simultaneously high levels of open defecation. The government needs to rethink the solution to the problem of open defecation and focus on providing public goods like sewage systems instead of free toilets.

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