

## DE-ODOURISING SEWAGE

Relevant for: Indian Society | Topic: Urbanization, their problems and their remedies incl. Migration & Smart Cities

The World Bank estimates that more than a fifth of all communicable diseases in India (21%) are caused by contaminated water. It attributes one in ten deaths in India to diseases or infections directly or indirectly transmitted through water. Over 500 children die every day in India due to diarrhoeal diseases.

Now, add nitrogen pollution to the list. According to a study by the Indian Nitrogen Group, a task force of scientists tracking the issue, the amount of reactive nitrogen in a bulk of the water bodies in India is already twice the limit prescribed by WHO. Nitrogen pollution from untreated sewage, the study found, now outstrips nitrogen pollution from the Indian farmer's urea addiction.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has managed to make toilets top of the mind in our country, with his Swachh Bharat Abhiyan. Toilets are being built in mission mode and there is enough anecdotal evidence to suggest that there has been a measurable reduction in the number of people defecating in the open, which stood at over 500 million — or half the population — a few years ago.

Ironically, India's latest, largest and most significantly scaled attempt at cleanliness — the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan — is likely to add to this problem.

Under the mission, in the past four years alone, over nine crore toilets have been constructed. Of these, only 60 lakh are in urban areas, where one assumes they are connected to some sort of sewage system (even this assumption is a stretch. A study done by the Centre for Science and Environment in 30 cities in Uttar Pradesh found that only 28% of toilets in these cities were connected to a sewage system). The rest will be generating fecal sludge, sewage and septage which has no place to go.

Which means that that too will simply get dumped, polluting land, surface and ground water and killing our rivers and ponds. According to the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), 63% of urban sewage flowing into rivers is untreated. The CPCB's website admits that the gap between sewage generated in urban areas (all Class 1 and Class 2 towns) and capacity for treating that is over 78%.

Besides, the numbers are a bit dodgy. Up to a third of the installed sewage treatment capacity is fully or partly dysfunctional. Even where the plants are working, many are not working at full capacity, because the infrastructure needed to feed the raw sewage into the treatment plant — a network of drains, sewers and pumping stations — is inadequate or incomplete.

All this, one would have presumed, prodded policymakers and governments into action. Just like the nation is building toilets in mission mode, one would have thought civic administrations would be building drains and sewers and treatment plants with the same zeal.

One would have presumed wrong. Even though it is arguably one of the major health hazards faced by the people — in cities, in particular — sewage and human waste is simply not on the agenda. Here's a telling statistic to illustrate my point — of the 99 cities in the 'Smart Cities' mission, which are collectively spending 2 lakh crore over five years (from 2015), only 2.4% of the money is going to be spent on waste management. Even storm water drainage (which only

removes short-term excess water during heavy downpours and doesn't really add to waste management) gets a higher share of 2.5%!

Of course, other schemes like the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) also fund such schemes. AMRUT covers a much larger spread — 500 so-called 'mission cities' across the country. Of these, only 217 pitched for a sewage treatment plant as an AMRUT project. Of these, in the last four years, only four have been completed, according to a reply filed in the Lok Sabha.

Even these numbers are misleading. Of the 212 schemes, as many as 189 are accounted for by just Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat. Only six other States have one or more projects under way. The rest have no plans.

This, despite the fact that water is increasingly becoming the biggest challenge faced by most Indian cities today. According to NITI Aayog's composite water management index report released last year, 75% of households do not have access to drinking water on premises, 70% households lack piped water (potable or otherwise) and as many as 20 cities will effectively use up all available water resources by 2020!

Sewage and waste need to come centrestage in our policy debates. Elections may be fought on 'bijli, sadak, paani' (power, roads, water) but no election is fought over naali (drain). Unless that happens, we run the real risk of eventually either choking or being poisoned by our own waste.

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