

## Stumbling towards sustainable sanitation

With 2018 under way, 30% of India's 4,386 cities and a quarter of the 685 districts have been verified as being free of open defecation by the urban and rural arms of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Mission), respectively. Over 4 million toilets have been built across cities, and close to 60 million toilets across the rural landscape since the mission's launch on 2 October 2014. Administrators of another 122 districts and 509 cities are awaiting verification of their status, and others find themselves pressed for time. Many states have set themselves steeper individual targets, challenging their already overworked front-line bureaucracies.

With only two more years left for the mission to achieve its target of an Open Defecation-Free (ODF) India, the high-pressure, target-driven approach towards toilet construction is likely to gain momentum and at the current rate of roughly 2,450 toilets constructed every hour, we may even meet the target.

The challenge, however, will be in ensuring that ODF villages and cities are firstly, truly ODF, but more crucially that they remain so. Habits are difficult to change, and social norms even more so. Yet, in a mission mode programme, the likelihood of continuing efforts towards an objective that has already been (even nominally) met is limited. Visits to ODF-declared panchayats by Accountability Initiative at the Centre for Policy Research between April and June last year found that work towards behaviour change usually stops cold as soon as the declaration is made.

Sustainable, safe sanitation demands unimpeded toilet usage. Breaking habits is only the first step. Usage can also be obstructed by simple choices like the type of toilet one builds. While the Swachh Bharat Mission-Gramin advocates low-cost, twin leach pit model, lack of awareness and a desire to own a "better" toilet coupled with poor construction quality, drive many households towards larger, cemented pits which local masons market as septic tanks. These tanks require much more water, and a means for safe containment and disposal of the waste. Water however is generally scarce and sewerage connections are simply not viable in most villages (and even some urban areas).

The results of this proliferation of septic tanks could be disastrous not only for sustainable sanitation, but also for another mission of the government—that to end manual scavenging. Between 2013 and 2017, the government's Self Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers was able to identify less than 14,000 manual scavenging households across the country. Activist groups claim that this is a gross underestimation of the actual problem and even the Socio Economic and Caste Census of 2011 listed over 10 times the number of manual scavengers. Meanwhile, seven manual scavenger deaths were reported in septic tank accidents in the first week of 2018 alone, to add to the 323 cases officially recorded till December 2017.

Yet, the debate is centred not on solutions but on the extent and even the existence of the problem. The reason: independent, national data on most of these issues is currently non-existent. In 2015, the Comptroller and Auditor General of India, while commenting on the preceding Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan, had warned that an effective mechanism for independent evaluations would be essential to ensure data integrity and "alone can provide reliable, periodic status check and timely remedial methods". Despite this, the much-awaited national annual sanitation survey is yet to leave the drawing board. The only non-government monitoring and verification process, Swachh Survekshan, has its limitations.

For instance, we simply do not know what kind of toilets have been created, or even whether they are being used consistently. The mission's management information system makes no record of toilet types, nor concerns itself with individual choices, beyond recommendatory guidelines. The

Swachh Survekshan urban reports are limited to city rankings and the latest rural report for 2017 is still not available in the public domain.

Even on the ground, the slow pace of verification and the lack of government monitoring post-declaration challenge sustainability. Especially so because of the absence of any form of social audits or community involvement in what is essentially meant to be a community-led movement.

In the coming two years, the mission has to build tens of millions of toilets, counsel and convince millions of often intransigent households of their value, dispel myths, and establish non-exploitative, modern systems for waste and sludge management. All this through an administration that is overburdened and under-equipped. If any of these knots are left untied when the mission ends, thousands of crores of rupees would have been spent to achieve what economist Lant Pritchett would term “mimicry of form without substance”.

*Avani Kapur is a fellow at the Centre for Policy Research and director of Accountability Initiative. Devashish Deshpande is senior research associate at Accountability Initiative.*

END

Downloaded from **crackIAS.com**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com

crackIAS.com