

Labelling versus outcomes: on Swachh Bharat Mission

On October 2, 2017, the [Swachh Bharat Mission \(SBM\) completed its third year](#). Over 60,000 crore has been spent on the programme, but despite its scope and importance, there is very little objective evidence about its performance

So far the numbers that have been widely cited by the government are from its own administrative data and the Swachh Survekshan Gramin 2017, conducted by the Quality Council of India (QCI), a body set up jointly by the Government of India and industry. Both the sources, i.e. QCI's survey and the SBM website, portray a similar picture. At the time when the survey was conducted between May and June 2017, Swachh Survekshan claimed 62.45% India-wide latrine coverage, which was similar to the SBM's figure of 63.73%. Moreover, the QCI survey also claimed that 91.29% of those with access to a toilet use it.

If true, these numbers would mean better public health outcomes in India — a very desirable outcome. However, one can debate their accuracy. Researchers who study sanitation agree that the questionnaire is structured to show the appearance of latrine use. In fact, research shows that surveys which pose a balanced question about open defecation or latrine use for each person in a household are able to document more open defecation than survey questions that group household members by demographic categories.

Off the mark

Inaccurate estimate of latrine use is not the only problem the SBM faces; a variety of implementation challenges exist as well. The pressure of an approaching deadline of making India open defecation free (ODF) is one.

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During my recent visit to a few villages in Uttar Pradesh to study the programme, a village pradhan described the pressure of building latrines: "Last year I was given the target of building 27 latrines, which I have got constructed, and now the target for this year is to build 104. After these are constructed, my village will be declared open defecation free." He did not mention that being declared ODF would depend on anyone using the constructed latrines. Moreover, he said that the criterion would include decrepit and unused structures constructed under Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan, the United Progressive Alliance government's latrine building programme. SBM counts these as functional latrines, as the baseline data in 2012 did. In fact, pictures of such defunct latrines can be seen on the SBM website categorised as "uploaded", "approved" and "counted".

The pradhan's experience is in line with findings by sanitation researchers in independent studies. In a report called "Quality and Sustainability of Toilets" (WaterAid, 2017), the authors report that in the eight States where the study was conducted, less than a quarter of households said that it was their own initiative to build the toilet. This is contrary to the government's claim that SBM is a people's movement.

In another study, "Swachh Bharat Mission (Gramin) Immersive Research," conducted by Praxis, the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), and WaterAid, researchers lived with families in each of the eight ODF villages selected. They aimed to explore behavioural change best practices in rural districts that have been declared ODF in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh.

Will Swachh Bharat Abhiyan be a success?

Although each of these villages had been declared ODF and the authorities verified them to be ODF, the 'Immersive' study found that of the eight verified ODF villages, only one was actually ODF, one was close to being ODF, and the rest had remarks such as "some OD observed," "OD areas identified," and "OD prevalent." The two "ODF verified villages" in Uttar Pradesh had 37% and 74%, respectively, of households without a toilet in their house. An "ODF verified" village in Rajasthan had a toilet coverage of just 16%.

False ODF claims were not the only disconcerting observations that the researchers made. In all the villages, the study found coercive measures having been used to promote the SBM. The authors say: "Panchayats have been making threats, though seldom imposed, with a variety of sanctions and punishments, ranging from denial of all State welfare schemes (for instance withdrawal of ration cards) to imposing of fines... and arrest and prosecution under various sections of [the] Indian Penal Code."

Unfortunately, we do not have credible, representative country-wide estimates of latrine use in India. On one hand, government data and the Swachh Survekshan show the programme to be achieving what it is meant to achieve. But, independent, rapid studies by sanitation researchers and anecdotal stories present a less rosy picture. The programme seems to be running on a check mark-based approach, and between all this, widespread open defecation in India continues to kill babies, and stunts those who survive.

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The definition of harassment needs to be constantly updated, and the process for justice made more robust

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