

THE PERSISTENCE OF OPEN DEFECATION

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

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Achieving an "open-defecation free" India may not be as simple as often assumed. According to recently released data from a mega survey conducted between July and December 2018 by the National Statistical Office (NSO), more than one-fourth of rural households lacked access to toilets. The survey found that only 71% of village homes had the facility, while the government's figure for the same period stood at 95%. The accuracy of such data, of course, is never easy to verify. The government on Monday put the gap down to "respondent bias" in the NSO survey.

But even if the actual figure is closer to 71% than 95%, it would mark a big leap from the 40% self-reported number recorded by the survey in 2012. The government's Swachh Bharat Mission has clearly made a difference. Most Indians now have toilets they could routinely use. The hitch, however, is that reaching 100% may yet prove difficult. This is because the mere construction of toilets does not mean they are in use. For one, habits are slow to change; not everyone is convinced that toilets are better for general hygiene than open defecation. For another, a toilet requires copious quantities of water for flushing, and water scarcity acts as a usage barrier. Reports from Rajasthan suggest that the effort to get girl-children educated has been hampered by a new household need to ferry water over large distances for toilets, a task typically assigned to girls. Water availability in other parts of India doesn't hold much promise.

In sum, it seems unlikely that open defecation will actually be eliminated in India. At the end, it may come down to an old market principle: Let toilets be available, but let people exercise choice.

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