

## Missing the point of Swachh Bharat Abhiyan

In 2014, more than half of India's population still practised open defecation. Prime Minister Narendra Modi set his government the goal of making the country open defecation-free in five years, by the 150th anniversary of M.K. Gandhi's birthday in 2019, by launching the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA). Three years later, we are more than halfway into that period, and there is good reason to be sceptical about its method.

The primary strategy of the SBA has been the construction of toilets. The programme has increased the money to be spent per toilet from the previous Rs10,000 to Rs12,000, and it mandates that water storage tanks be built alongside government latrines. Strategically, however, there is hardly any difference from the previous government's Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan, and the Total Sanitation Campaign and the Central Rural Sanitation Programme before that.

The problem with this strategy is that access to toilets is not the reason why India has alarming rates of open defecation, nor is lack of education or access to water. India's per-capita gross domestic product, level of educational attainment and access to water predict much lower levels of open defecation than it actually has. The question is why, in 2011, had 70% of rural Indians not built toilets when their contemporaries in other developing countries could afford to do so?

What exacerbates the puzzle is evidence showing that not only do Indians not build toilets, they avoid using those that have been constructed already. India doesn't collect individual data on latrine usage; there is only household data that notes the presence or absence of latrines. Therefore, there is no way to know exactly how many people defecate in the open. But a survey by the Research Institute for Compassionate Economics in 2014 found that over 40% of the households in its survey of 3,235 that had a working latrine, had at least one member who nevertheless defecates in the open. Thus, even if the government does build the remaining toilets, it is not certain that people will use them.

Why rural Indians refrain from using latrines has much to do with the kind of latrines that can be built in villages and traditional norms that define purity and pollution. Villages don't have sewage systems because of which pit-latrines are constructed. These latrines collect the faeces in the pit; the moisture percolates in the ground and the faeces dry. This is a tremendous improvement in terms of public health over dry-latrines, which require manual scavengers to pick up the faeces, or for faeces to be washed away and potentially pollute water sources.

The idea of having a pit-latrine, however, is disgusting to millions of Indians. According to religious beliefs, physical cleanliness is not always the same as ritual purity. For example, cow dung and vegetable peels strewn on the floor are physically dirty, but ritually pure. Newborn babies, even if clean, are considered ritually impure. Human faeces and menstrual cloths are both physically dirty and ritually impure. Rural Indians commonly complain that it is dirty to have a pit latrine in the house; what they are emphasizing is not physical cleanliness, but ritual purity.

For the English-speaking elite, it is easy to forget that for a caste-conscious society, social mobility depends on emulating the practices of the so-called higher castes. This is done by imposing on oneself stricter standards of ritual purity and cleanliness. Manually cleaning pit-latrines, usually equated with the most degrading forms of Dalit labour, does not augur well with that aspiration.

India cannot become free of open defecation by only building more toilets. Unfortunately, more than 97% of the SBA-Gramin's budget has been spent on the construction of individual household toilets.

What the evidence shows is that traditional norms associated with caste and untouchability are keeping people from using latrines. This means that the solution requires a concerted effort to change people's views about open defecation. While the SBA-Gramin allocates only 8% of the budget to information, education and communication activities, the actual expenditure is even lower, dropping from 4% in 2014-15 to 1% in 2015-16 and 2016-17. Latrine ownership should be promoted as a matter of prestige and affiliation with the modern world. At the same time, there should be more effort to inform people about the mortality burden of open defecation. Modi has made efforts to instil a new sense of civic pride in throwing garbage in trash cans. This is a laudable strategy, but it should be accompanied with an effort to change the attitudes towards caste hierarchies.

*Do you think Swachh Bharat Abhiyan is the right response to India's sanitation problem? Tell us at [views@livemint.com](mailto:views@livemint.com)*

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