

## THINK SMALL: ON GANGA REJUVENATION

Relevant for: World & Indian Geography | Topic: Distribution of key natural resources - Water Resources incl. Rivers & related issues in world & India

Bad sanitation is India's worst-kept secret, but recent data from Uttar Pradesh show that in spite of working in mission mode to expand sanitation, 87% of faecal sludge expelled from toilets in urban areas is untreated. Viewed against the 2030 goal to achieve clean water and sanitation for all under the UN Sustainable Development Agenda, this depressing statistic shows how much work remains to be done. State support for improved housing and planned development has never been strong, and the National Urban Sanitation Policy of 2008 has not changed that significantly. At the national scale, a United Nations report of 2015 estimates that 65,000 tonnes of untreated faeces is introduced into the environment in India annually. The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan promised a major shift, but it has focussed more on the basic requirement of household and community toilets in rural and urban areas. The study in U.P. conducted by the Centre for Science and Environment has now exposed broken links, of faecal sludge and septage being collected from household tanks and simply discharged into drains, open land and wetlands. The problem of the waste not being contained, collected without manual labour, transported and treated safely is becoming graver. It is now time for a new approach. This has to be decentralised and different from the strategy being used to clean the Ganga, for which the NDA government announced an outlay of 20,000 crore in 2015. That strategy relies on large sewage treatment plants for riverside cities and towns.

Immediate investments in decentralised sludge management systems would bring twin benefits: of improving the environment and reducing the disease burden imposed by insanitary conditions. It is welcome that the CSE study is being followed up with a mapping exercise on the flow of faecal waste streams in individual cities. The results for Varanasi, Allahabad and Aligarh in particular should be revealing, since the collection efficiency for sludge in these cities ranges from just 10% to 30%. One immediate intervention needed is the creation of an inter-departmental task force to identify land to build small treatment systems for sludge, and to provide easily accessible solutions to houses that are currently discharging waste into open drains. The business of emptying faecal material using tanker trucks needs to be professionalised and de-stigmatised. It is untenable that manual scavengers continue to be employed in violation of the law to clean septic tanks in some places, and caste factors play out in the recruitment of workers even in the mechanised operations. All aspects of the business of sanitation need reform if India is to meet Goal Number 6 of the Sustainable Development Goals with egalitarian policies. A large State such as Uttar Pradesh provides the opportunity to demonstrate commitment to policy. Success here can transform lives.

The headline has been edited for a typo. The error is regretted.

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M.J. Akbar should have resigned. Or else, asked to go

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**END**

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