

MILES TO GO BEFORE BECOMING OPEN DEFECATION-FREE

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

The plea claimed that residents of a slum at Sarai Kale Khan in south Delhi still defecate in the open due to lack of toilets. Photo used for representation purpose only. File Photo

October 2 was not only Mahatma Gandhi's 150th birth anniversary, but also the fifth, and perhaps final, anniversary of the Swachh Bharat Mission. Speaking in Gujarat, Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared India "open defecation-free".

But is rural India really open defecation-free? The Swachh Bharat Mission website claims with some caveats that the country has achieved 100% coverage of latrine ownership. If this was the definition of being open defecation-free, then, again with some caveats, India can be declared so.

Ten months ago, our team revisited families we had interviewed in a 2014 survey in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. We asked about the defecation behaviour of nearly 10,000 people. Between 2014 and the end of 2018, latrine ownership in the region had increased by 34 percentage points. Yet, even in States that had already been declared open defecation-free, the actual coverage was far below 100%. Although the percentage of people defecating in the open declined by 26 percentage points, close to half still reported to be relieving themselves in the open. And sadly, the programme barely managed to bring any change in the behaviour of latrine owners. Like in 2014, about a quarter of people who own a functional latrine continued to defecate in the open. Overall, the study found that 44% of people in these four States defecated in the open. These facts are unlikely to have radically changed in only 10 months.

Some may call Mr. Modi's declaration a political overstatement and move on to celebrate the reduction in open defecation. But doing so will leave us with an unanswered question: Will India have a sanitation policy that will address the remaining who openly defecate? For those who care about India's abandoned toilets and stunted health outcomes, this is an important question.

In the past five years, the Indian government has built a 100 million toilets. This implies that it constructed 38 toilets every minute that had passed since the Swachh Bharat Mission was launched. With a country as large as India, this is a big achievement. But another important question to ask here is: how was this achieved?

Hard-working government officials going around convincing people to build and use a latrine might be half the story, but the remaining half is alarming. From talking to 156 government officials, we learned that many rural Indians were threatened with or even denied their legal rights, such as PDS ration, for not building a latrine. Officials resorted to threats of fines and jail terms to intimidate people in some places.

"The tehsildar came [to our village] once. He told the *patwari* that he should cancel the Kisan Credit Cards of people who did not build toilets," said a village secretary in M.P. In Rajasthan, a ration dealer told us that the government had asked him to "stop people's ration until they had a *niralo ghar* [house with a toilet] stamp on their ration card".

With unrealistic targets pushed down from the top, "Swachh Bharat Mission beneficiaries" were

not alone in facing coercion. Government officials at every level – whether elected, appointed, or contracted – faced immense pressure and threats from their bosses. A block coordinator in M.P. said, “We have to motivate people but we also have construction targets. We have to build 18,000 toilets before October 2 [2018]. So, we have put motivation aside and we focus on the construction target. I am a contract worker. They tell us that if we don’t get 700 toilets built, we will be fired.”

Coercion in some form or the other was ubiquitous in almost all the places we visited. More than half of the families we talked to reported the use of coercive activities in their villages to get people to build or use latrines; one in every four families told us that they have heard of government benefits being withdrawn for not having a latrine; and Dalits and Adivasis were at least twice as likely as others to report that they or their family members had faced coercion.

The spirit of bidding farewell to open defecation as a gift to Gandhi deserves accolades. But we must not forget that there are still miles to go. India needs to have a sanitation policy that focuses on reducing open defecation. And most importantly, it should follow Gandhi’s path of ahimsa and compassion.

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