

## Open Defecation In India: Issues And Challenges

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### Abstract

*Much of the world's population is in dire need of improved sanitation, but it remains a neglected priority. Currently, 2.5 billion people do not have access to improved sanitation worldwide, and nearly 1.1 billion resorts to open defecation. The United Nations Millennium Development Goals include a global target of a 75% improvement in sanitation coverage by 2015, but with current progress rates, this target is one of the most inaccessible. India is a prime example of the global sanitation challenge; nearly 60% of the world's open defecation occurs in India. Going by the present pace of progress, India will achieve the millennium development goals (MDGs) on sanitation only by 2054. Despite economic growth, government latrine construction, and increasing recognition among policymakers that open defecation constitutes a health and human capital crisis, it remains stubbornly widespread especially in rural India. Open defecation is prevalent among all socio-economic groups in rural India though the bottom two wealth quintiles bear the heaviest burden. Children—already vulnerable and marginalized—pay the highest price in respect of their survival and development. This well-established traditional behaviour is deeply ingrained through practice from early childhood; it is taught. Other reasons cited for its persistence in India include poverty (the inability to afford toilets), landlessness, tenants in housing without toilets (usually urban), and deep-rooted cultural and social norms that have established open defecation as an acceptable practice. Open defecation poses significant health and environmental risks. Open defecation also creates vulnerability, particularly for women and girls who experience a loss of dignity or are exposed to abuse and harassment while defecating in the open. Although there is much discussion of public sanitation and “open defecation”, highlighted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's slogan of “pehle shauchalaya, phir devalaya”, taming human waste in India proves a complex challenge, far more than building one or two toilets every second. Convincing Indians to use toilets is a bigger challenge than actually building them. Many people have a revealed preference for open defecation, such that merely providing latrine “access” without promoting latrine use is unlikely to importantly reduce open defecation. Government latrine construction will not be enough to eliminate open defecation, without a revolution in latrine use. If the Government is to achieve its goal of eliminating open defecation by 2019, it must concentrate on building demand for latrine use in India and initiate a large scale campaign to promote latrine use.*

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