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Problem of Open Defecation in India

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This article is based on **“How big a challenge is sustaining India's open-defecation free status”** which was published in Down To Earth on 31/10/2019. It talks about issues in India's pursuit of becoming open defecation free.

In the past four years, India has built 100 million toilets in about 0.6 million villages and 6.3 million in cities, making India largely open defecation free (ODF). The country has been declared open defecation free (ODF) — a seemingly impossible task just some years ago.

In this context, the **Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM)** has become the global benchmark for participatory and transformative development. However, there are many challenges before India can truly claim itself as ODF.

Problem of Open Defecation

- Open defecation refers to the practise whereby people go out in fields, bushes, forests, open bodies of water, or other open spaces rather than using the toilet to defecate.
- It poses a serious threat to the health of children in India.
- It exposes women to the danger of physical attacks and encounters such as snake bites.
- Poor sanitation also cripples national development, by diverting people's hard-earned money towards out of pocket expenditure on health (leading cause of dragging people into poverty), rather than productive investment like education.

Achievements under SBM

SBM emphasizes generating awareness, sharing information and creating behaviour change to bridge the gap between building toilets and their proper use.

- According to government estimates, by February 2019, over 93 per cent of the country's rural households had access to toilets; over 96 per cent of them also used the toilets, suggesting an **important change in behaviour**.
- The government surveys suggest that 99 per cent of the toilets were well maintained, hygienic and in 100 per cent of these toilets, excreta was "safely" disposed — there was no pollution, **no stagnant water, no wastewater and only minimal litter**.
- The **Economic Survey 2018-19** says the gains of the toilet programme are showing up in **health indicators** — dramatic reduction in diarrhoea and malaria cases in children under 5 years of age in districts with high coverage of toilets in households.
- India's achievement will also help it to meet its **sustainable development goal 6.2, which aimed** "to achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation".

Reasons for its success

- **Political leadership:** Arguably the biggest game-changer for the SBM, was the Prime Minister of India investing his personal political capital in the mission.
It created a domino-like effect, cascading to the grassroots level.
- **Public financing:** Over Rs 1 lakh crore was committed to ensuring universal access to sanitation.
About 90% of the households which received toilets were from socially and economically weaker sections of society and they received financial incentives to build and use toilets.
- **Partnerships:** SBM partnered with implementers and influencers like: National and international development agencies, media houses, civil society, celebrities, as well as all departments/ministries of the government of India.
UNICEF in India is working in collaboration with the Health Ministry to map **WASH (Water Sanitation and Hygiene)** compliance in health facilities in the most deprived districts and is making recommendations to address non-compliance.
- **All hands on deck approach:** SBM trained over half a million swachhagrahis, (grassroots motivators), who triggered behaviour change in every village in India.
 - Ordinary people undertook extraordinary roles and inspired others to build and use toilets.
 - SBM captured the imagination of the people, and became a people's movement or a jan andolan.

Challenges to ODF

While the Swachh Bharat Mission has made rapid strides in terms of making toilets more pervasive throughout the country, entrenched socioeconomic factors may be limiting access to and use of sound sanitation practices in Indian villages.

- Though the government has provided toilets but many areas in India are affected by **water scarcity**.
- There is the issue of **excreta disposal**. The toilets built by the government has a system for containment of the excreta, not its disposal.
 - It assumes that the toilet will safely decompose the excreta in-situ. However, the quality of septic tanks is poor.
 - Also, the waste is unsafely disposed through tanker operators on the land, or worse, in water bodies.
 - Unsafe disposal of excreta would become the source of soil and water contamination, thereby taking away the health gains.
- Even if toilets are built and people have started using these, the trend can reverse in no time. People might slip back into the **old habit of open defecation**.

Way Forward

- Movies like Toilet Ek Prem Katha is a step in the right direction, as they spur behavioural change and will help to curb the slipping back to open defecation.
- Government under **Jal Jeevan Mission** seeks to provide piped water to all households by 2024.
 - This will address the issue to water scarcity which affects sanitation.
- There is also a need to move from ODF to ODF+ and ODF++ protocol.
- Original ODF protocol issued in March 2016, said – “A city/ward is notified as ODF city/ward if, at any point of the day, not a single person is found defecating in the open.”
- The new ODF+ protocol: if, “at any point of the day, not a single person is found defecating and/or urinating in the open, and all community and public toilets are functional and well-maintained.”
- The ODF++ protocol adds the condition that “faecal sludge/septage and sewage is safely managed and treated, with no discharging and/or dumping of untreated faecal sludge/septage and sewage in drains, water bodies or open areas.”

The gaps remaining in SBM should be plugged, such as, people who still lack toilets are provided access to the same, retrofitting primitive style toilets which are not yet sustainably safe, and ensuring proper waste disposal to ensure the complete success of SBM.

Drishti Mains Question

Swachh Bharat Mission has become the global benchmark for participatory and transformative development, but still, certain challenges remain before India can truly claim its success. Comment.