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The Broken Sanitation System of India

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This article is based on **“The Dirty Truth”** which was published in the Indian Express on 29/04/2021. It talks about how the pandemic has worsened the already deteriorating sanitation system of India and what are the measures that need to be taken.

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed India’s broken system of sanitation. Newly-built “dry latrines” and “hanging toilets” in rural India are the result of the lockdowns of 2020-21.

Despite the **Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013**, and a strict ban on dry latrines, about 46,000 new dry latrines were built during the pandemic only.

The primary reason for the construction of these illegal toilets is that sanitary toilets have become hotbeds of disease.

The lockdowns, being imposed again due to the second wave of Covid-19, have multiplied the sanitation struggle in India, so much so that people are fearing the outcome of using the public toilets every day.

Present Scenario of India’s Sanitation System

- **State-Wise Condition:** Small pits filled with human excrement near construction sites in Uttar Pradesh highlight the re-emergence open-defecation pattern in India.
 - In **West Bengal**, more toilets are found to be constructed as “raised beds with small holes” at the centre, known as **hanging toilets**, built by families who do not want to use sanitary toilets as they are always filled with excrement and faeces.
 - In **Delhi**, the extension of Ghazipur, Bhalswa and Okhla landfills serve as a big defecation ground for nearby communities.
 - In **Tamil Nadu**, locals claim that unused toilets often become playgrounds for wild animals and snakes, just as in **Goa**.
 - In **Madhya Pradesh** and **Rajasthan**, the toilets in villages have become “death traps” because of the usage of substandard material for construction.
 - In **Mizoram**, there is a prevalence of unique “**tree house**” **toilets** which are like the hanging toilets, but three times higher. Excrement keeps getting filled in open pits on the ground throughout the day.
- **Toilets in Rural India:** Sanitary toilet usage has declined in rural India due to the Covid-19.
 - Currently, more than six lakh toilets in rural India have acute water shortage.
 - Around 1,20,000 toilets have no water supply and thousands of toilets are completely abandoned, with collapsing roofs, water pipes in poor shape and soggy, broken doors.
- **Open Defecation:** As toilet usage becomes a problem, another trend is the four-fold increase in open defecation in rural India with defecation sites being close to garbage dumps and local water bodies.
 - These dumps contain a large number of used masks, PPE kits and effluents.
 - The pandemic has also forced India’s sanitation workers to discard plastic bags filled with excrement and infected COVID-19 gear found on the periphery of community toilets even in the remotest areas.
- **Manual Scavenging:** According to the **National Commission of Safai Karamcharis (NCSK)**, a total of 53,598 people (29,923 in U.P. alone) had been identified as engaged in manual scavenging after surveys in 2013 and 2018.
 - Tamil Nadu reported the highest number of deaths due to manual scavenging.
 - Gujarat has the highest number of cases where the compensation amount was not paid for deaths due to manual scavenging, followed by Maharashtra.
- **Biomedical Waste Generation:** According to a Central Pollution Control Board report, released in November 2020, India generated around 33,000 tonnes of Covid-19 biomedical waste between April and November.
 - Before the pandemic, regular biomedical waste generation in India was at 610 MT per day, but now, the waste has gone up to 765.5 MT per day.
 - **Maharashtra has been the biggest contributor to biomedical waste** including Uttar Pradesh and Delhi among the top 10 waste generators.

- **Gender-Based Sanitation Insecurity:** There is a disproportionate burden faced by women regarding shortage of or the non-availability of sanitation facilities.
Women face threats to their life and feel unsafe while seeking a toilet facility or while going out for open defecation.
This leads to the consumption of less food and water by the women to minimize the need to exit the home to use toilets.

Steps to be Taken

- **Re-Evaluating the State of Toilets:** The dependence on unimproved water sources in rural India even within sanitary toilets increases the need to re-evaluate the obsession with toilet construction in India.
The maintenance systems need to be tackled immediately which can be done by re-surveying the state of the toilets that were built more than 5 years ago..
- **Reforms for Sanitation Labours:** The sanitation system needs to go hand in hand with the water system, combined with an assessment of sanitation behaviour and sanitation labour reforms in India, at every single step.
Bringing the **Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation (Amendment) Bill, 2020** into force and completely eradicate manual scavenging in order to mechanise the scavenging and prevent further deaths due to the same.
- **Eradication of Dry Latrines and Hanging Toilets:** The usage of both dry latrines and hanging toilets puts the communities around them at high risk of illness, beyond Covid-19. Therefore, both the construction and usage of these units needs to be eradicated.
- **Biomedical Waste Management:** It is imperative to define Covid-19 waste, identify different types of waste generators and launch a large-scale campaign for awareness related to PPE usage.
 - Urban local bodies must provide separate waste bins, and push citizens to segregate waste at source.
 - The government must also augment the capacities of biomedical treatment units with appropriate monitoring strategies and work with all stakeholders such as doctors, innovators and medical items and equipment manufacturers to come up with a plan to reduce the waste burden.
- **Ensuring Behaviour Change:** Information, education, and communication, which aims at behavior change of the masses towards toilets and other sanitation facilities specially for women.

Conclusion

With no escape from COVID-19, the toilet traditions have highlighted major loopholes in India's sanitation system, where the focus is majorly on building new infrastructure rather than surveying the existing ones.

The government shall stringently respond to the problem of open defecation, manual scavenging and lack of toilet and sanitation facilities for women.

Drishti Mains Question

“The notion of Open-Defecation Free India will not be fulfilled by the effort of an individual but requires a collaborative approach of the government and public requiring welfare policies and a change in the mindset go hand in hand”. Discuss.
