

Critically Evaluating the ‘Swachh Bharat Mission’

What is the issue?

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Independent studies on the ‘Swachh Bharat Mission – SBM (rural) contradicts the government’s claims.

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What was the focus of SBM -Rural?

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- The primary priority of the SBM-rural was to ensure an ‘Open Defecation Free’ India by 2018.

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- To achieve these measures, government imposed a swachh Bharat Cess to raise funds and set out on a vigorous campaign.

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- It set ambitious targets for every ‘administrative village’ for constructing toilets within specific deadlines to ensure 100% latrine access.

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What does the data say?

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- Over Rs. 60,000 crore has been spent on the programme thus far.

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- But despite its scope and importance, there is very little objective evidence about its performance.

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- Apart from the government’s data, the only other comprehensive data source is with the ‘Swachh Survekshan Gramin’ – SSG 2017.

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- SSG survey was conducted by the Quality Council of India (QCI), a body set up jointly by the Government of India and industry.

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- Both sources portray a similar picture, which rated nation-wide latrine coverage at around 63%.
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- Moreover, the QCI survey also claimed that 91.29% of those with access to a toilet use it.
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What are the problems with the official data?

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Despite the lack of other comprehensive data pointers, independent studies on a smaller scale have largely contradicted the official version.

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- **Quantitative Approach** - Implementation of the program was highly number intensive with focus on building physical structures.
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- After the targeted number of latrines is constructed, a village will be declared open defecation free.
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- Hence, there seemed to be concerted effort to look into whether the latrines are being used and open defecation has gone down.
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- **Exaggerating Count** - Unused structures constructed under UPA government's latrine building programme "Nirmal Bharat" have also been counted under SBM.
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- In fact, pictures of many such defunct latrines can be seen on the SBM website categorised as uploaded, approved and counted.
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- Also, certain villages have been declared "ODF verified villages" in where less than 30% households have a latrine.
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- **Nudged questionnaires** - QCI survey says that 91% of those having access to latrines use them - which aren't the case.
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- Some researchers say that questionnaire used for surveys by government was biased to get an outcome in support of latrine use.
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- Notably, surveys that posed a balanced questionnaire captured more open defecation practices.

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Is it really a people's movement?

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- **Forcing Compliance** - The study found that in most villages, coercive measures & threats were used to promote the SBM.
- Name shaming and harassment of people by officials burdened with targets were flagged in many places.
- Notably, less than a quarter of households said that it was their own initiative to build the toilet.
- This is contrary to the government's claim that SBM is a people's movement.
- It also defeats the very purpose of the program - which is to drive in a mindset change among people for achieving sustained cleanliness.
- **Debt Burden** - The program operated on a 'build first and get reimbursed later' model - to promote project ownership among people.
- But considering that it cost anywhere between Rs. 12-25 thousand to build a latrine, and the kind of institutional pressure to comply, many were forced to borrow from informal source.

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Source: The Hindu

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