

SWITCHING TO SANITATION IN SOUTH ASIA: A STUDY OF HEALTH TECHNOLOGY



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IN BRIEF

- » Sanitation is crucial for health and financial prosperity, and thus economic growth
- » Of the 1 billion people in the world who have no toilet, India accounts for nearly 600m
- » Cultural practices are the principal issue preventing improved sanitation

“Sanitation is more important than independence” - Mahatma Gandhi

Good sanitation is crucial for peoples' health and financial prosperity, and thus their country's economic growth. This IGC study examines the characteristics of Indian households that have improved their own sanitation to provide an in-depth understanding of why, despite its importance, progress towards increasing access to sanitation has been extremely slow.

The diseases spread by poor sanitation kill hundreds of thousands of Indian children each year and stunt the physical and cognitive development of those who survive. Yet, of the 1 billion people in the world who have no toilet, India still accounts for nearly 600m. This helps to explain why in India, despite rising incomes and better diets, rates of child malnourishment have not improved faster. Hundreds of thousands continue to die from preventable conditions each year.

The research found it is a mistake to believe that rural sanitation in India is principally an infrastructure shortage. The problem is not access. Demand for latrines is constrained by cultural practices concerning ritual impurity. These findings suggest that, in spite of the new Indian government's commitment to building 5.2 million latrines by the end of 2014, the mere availability of public toilets will not end open defecation. What is needed instead are public campaigns to explain the health and economic benefits of using toilets and of better hygiene. Such campaigns would not only mean government-built latrines have a better chance of being used; they would also encourage households to build them for themselves.