

The Western world may take them for granted, but in India, home to more than 1.2 billion people, about [half the population has no access to or doesn't use toilets](#) . That's 600 million individuals, or 120 million households: a formidable challenge for sanitation.

But it's a challenge that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has embraced wholeheartedly. His [Swachh Bharat!](#) (or Clean India!) campaign aims to build 100 million household toilets and 500,000 community toilets by 2019.

It's 18 months since the new prime minister inaugurated the program. He chose Mahatma Gandhi's 145th birthday, October 2, 2014. Gandhi was a major advocate of sanitation.

A clean India, Modi declared, would be achieved by the 150th anniversary in 2019. That is also the year of the next scheduled general election.

Since October 2014, there have been hundreds of photo opportunities and activities aimed at cleaning up domestic waste and at toilet building. Tens of millions of rupees have been committed – US\$20 million went into advertising alone in the first six months.

The interest of the prime minister and the investment of substantial funds have given public sanitation and public health a profile that they have never had before in India.

So, will Modi achieve his dream of bringing sanitation to the masses?

Robin Jeffrey speaks about Indian sanitation. **The sanitation challenge**

In the eyes of various people, from Gandhi in the 1920s to foreign tourists in 2016, India has offered extraordinary examples of unhygienic practices.

“During my wanderings,” Gandhi wrote in Young India in 1925, “nothing has been so painful to me as to observe our insanitation throughout the length and breadth of the land.”

Today, as the middle class expands and non-resident Indians with experience and expectations acquired abroad come and go, pressure to achieve sanitation targets is growing.

Depending on who is counting, [India collects between 55 million and 70 million tonnes of waste a year](#). The [United States is estimated to produce about 250 million tonnes a year](#), three-and-a-half times more for a population a quarter of the size. As Indian affluence grows, the potential for more garbage is a menace that the Clean India campaign is trying to head off.

Further impetus comes from widespread acknowledgement that random defecation, whether in town or countryside, injures public health and [leads to physical and mental stunting in children](#).

[India’s record in these matters falls behind](#) sub-Saharan Africa and neighbouring Bangladesh.

Two factors make India’s struggle with public sanitation different from the experience of urbanisation in Europe and North America in the 19th and 20th centuries, and from the problems of other ex-colonial countries today.

The first difference is the sheer volume of waste and the scarcity of space to deal with it. India’s population density is about 370 people per square km. China’s is about 150.

However you treat waste, you need space – for composting, biogas manufacture, sanitary landfill, sorting and recycling, incinerating. Nowhere else in the world have so many people generated waste on this scale and had so little space to deal with it.

The second problem lies in caste and the ideas and practices that go with it. [Fifteen per cent of Indians are Dalits](#) (“scheduled castes” in official language and once referred to as “untouchables”). Sections of

Dalits have had “waste” as their expected vocation for generations.

As Indian scholar Sonal Sharma wrote this year, “Various micro-level studies show that [non-Dalit workers do not like to clean toilets](#) and that the workers who clean toilets are always from lowest castes.”

A great many higher-caste people are repelled by the idea of connection with any kind of “waste”.

Possibilities and pitfalls

In Swachh Bharat’s favour is the work of activists and some dedicated sanitary engineers over the past 20 years. The [Solid Waste Management Rules](#) laid down by the Supreme Court of India in 2000 are an excellent guide, and local governments not following them are in contempt of the nation’s highest court.

The rules go into fine detail about how to set up collection systems and disposal centres. They prohibit “manual handling of waste” and restrict “land filling ... to non-biodegradable, inert waste”.

As such ambitious standards suggest, [no local government has been able to get within a tiger’s roar](#) of meeting the requirements of the rules. They are a worthy, distant target.

At scattered locations around the country, local governments, non-government organisations and some businesses have shown remarkable achievements in [cleaning up neighbourhoods, reusing and recycling materials](#) and maintaining clean public toilets. There’s unlikely to be a shortage of public funding, as the prime minister’s reputation is on the line.

Household income is not a crucial obstacle. Of India’s 120 million non-toilet households, a significant percentage could have afforded a toilet long ago if they had wanted one. There’s a

cultural struggle to be won about the importance for health – especially childhood health – of taming human excrement.

There's also an authority problem. Local governments, responsible for public sanitation, are underpowered legally, financially and administratively. For officials, service in local government carries little prestige and modest salaries. Local governments have trouble extracting rates and dues from residents, and the legal difficulties in locating sites for waste management are great.

It would be unwise, however, to write off Swachh Bharat. India has achieved some surprising results in the past 15 years. Tobacco smoke used to be everywhere; today [some states are largely smoke-free](#)

. Some too have done a fair job in [trying to eliminate plastic bags](#)

. The [Delhi underground network, the Metro, was completed on time and on budget](#) and serves the city well.

Swachh Bharat has the benefit of prime ministerial backing in a way that no Indian clean-up campaign has had before.

That's risky politics, because if "insanitation throughout the length and breadth of the land" is still a problem at election time in 2019, it will provide a propaganda picnic for opposition parties seeking to oust an incumbent government. The photo opportunities will be very different from those recent ones of smiling politicians, awkwardly held brooms and sparkling corridors.

Correction: this article was updated on April 1 2016. The headline incorrectly stated that Swachh Bharat aims to build 1.5 million toilets.

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Indian PM risks political backlash if plan to build 100 million toilets fails

Written by The Conversation USA

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