

# SANITATION IN INDIA

Only 31 percent of the 167 million rural households in India have access to tap water and domestic toilets.<sup>1</sup> To meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) target by 2015, sanitation coverage among the rural population needs to rise to 53 percent, a huge challenge in terms of investment, creation of facilities and related hygiene practices.<sup>2</sup>

As everyone knows, fecal matter spreads numerous gastrointestinal diseases, either by direct contact or through tainted food or water. According to the UN Deputy Secretary-General, Jan Eliasson (May 2014) "...a child dies every two-and-a-half minutes from diseases linked to open defecation."<sup>3</sup> Diarrhea is the second largest killer of children below five years of age. Nutrition-related factors contribute to about 45 percent of deaths in children under five years of age.<sup>4</sup> Exposure to fecal matter is also related to skin diseases, respiratory diseases, eye problems, scabies, and intestinal parasites that cause kidney damage. Open defecation can also cause mental and cognitive stunting in young children. When water sources become contaminated during rainy seasons or near running streams, diseases are spread through drinking supplies and contaminated food, and the cycle of diseases continues.

**Security & Dignity:** The degrading reality of not having close access to toilets means that women and girls, traveling in groups if possible for protection, must use the fields before sunrise and after sunset to defecate. The social and personal indignities for them are magnified during the menstrual cycle, rainy seasons, and times of unsettled stomach and/or diarrhea. In any case, such precautions cannot entirely protect women and girls from the threat of being raped. The problem is especially acute among low-caste (Dalit) people. The fact that many primary schools also lack plumbing is a blatant de facto barrier to low-caste girls getting even basic education, which, in turn, continues the cycle of abject poverty from generation to generation.

Volunteer agencies and NGOs have made major contributions over the decades to improving sanitation in rural India. And various UN agencies, including The World Bank, UNICEF and WHO, have also been at work on these problems. Newly elected Prime Minister Narendra Modi has announced an ambitious multi-year Clean India Program with several initiatives. In his first Independence Day speech, for example, Modi urged all parliamentarians to invest their constituency funds for separate boys and girls toilets in every school.<sup>5</sup>

The 2014 World Toilet Day (Nov 19) focused on Equality and Dignity. Rajasthan's Bikaner District (one of 33 Rajasthan's districts) partnered with the World Bank's Global Water Practice's Water and Sanitation Program to provide technical assistance in a community-led sanitation campaign that focused on pride and dignity for women, for families, and for villages.<sup>6</sup>

Everyone seems to know where the problems lie, but after decades of effort, very little progress has been made. Why? Such are the issues, ripped from today's headlines and websites that I address in *The Sincere Veneer*.

Let me give you a few examples:

I argue that the development industry's obsession to reach the Millennium Development Goals serves the interests of the mega-bureaucratized institutions of the industry far more than it serves the interests of those living in poverty.

Given the “Collusion of Elites” I describe in Chapter 2 and further analyze throughout the book (as exemplified in India) it will remain nearly impossible to empower self-governing local institutions and well-placed people in local communities unless the very structure of the industry changes. Providing toilets at or near homes would be a major advance for India’s rural poor. But subservient peasants are essential to the highly stratified system of land ownership prevalent in India, and other parts of the developing world.

In short, it’s essential to understand the underlying socio-cultural phenomena, together with the attending social inequities, before designing programs, projects and activities.

Central tenants of *The Sincere Veneer* are to

- a) build infrastructure and systems at district level
- b) integrate projects across multiple sectors, so as to
- c) reduce fragmented development schemes with important pieces missing or poorly coordinated
- d) devote sufficient resources to follow-through to ensure long-term effectiveness; and
- e) take proactive measures to reduce corruption throughout the systems.

In the case of hygiene in India, empowering rural communities to become involved in toilet construction is a simple thing, but it would be of great benefit to the communities involved, and given the proper support, would lead to the enhancement of other basic health services. Water and sanitation schemes in urban slums would also have a far greater degree of success using a stepwise succession of coordinated local initiatives.

The message of *The Sincere Veneer* is straightforward. It has been designed and written to highlight practical tools and techniques, and it stresses the importance of evaluating the effectiveness of new initiatives on a regular basis, while maintaining the flexibility to change directions in pursuit of those that work best.

## Endnotes

- 1 <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2014/01/07/rural-water-supply-sanitation-four-indian-states>
- 2 [http://www.unicef.org/india/about\\_unicef\\_3708.htm](http://www.unicef.org/india/about_unicef_3708.htm)
- 3 <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/endopendefecation.shtml>
- 4 <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs178/en/>
- 5 <http://www.ndtv.com/article/india/a-toilet-for-every-school-says-pm-modi-calling-for-clean-india-576288>
- 6 <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2014/11/18/on-world-toilet-day-focus-is-on-equality-and-dignity>