what explains widespread open defecation in India?

links between widespread open defecation and culture

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source: UNICEF-WHO JMP
the other Indian exception:
little use of simple latrines

source: UNICEF-WHO JMP
what makes India different?
India is an outlier

Can other development indicators explain widespread open defecation in India?

**one:** India is an outlier
it’s not because of income

46 of 55 countries

India

source: UNICEF-WHO JMP for open defecation; World Bank WDI for ICP GDP per capita
it’s not because of poverty

19 of 21 countries

source: UNICEF-WHO JMP for open defecation; World Bank WDI for poverty
it’s not about education

23 of 28 countries

source: UNICEF-WHO JMP for open defecation; World Bank for literacy
it’s not about water: rural only

source: UNICEF-WHO JMP
what do rural north Indians think about open defecation and latrine use?

two: two studies of attitudes and behaviors
research methodology

SQUAT
• quantitative, structured interviews
• 3,200 rural households
• 5 states of north India

Switching
• qualitative, semi-structured interviews
• 100 rural households
• 4 regions

study areas contain
one-third of global open defecation
it’s not about access: open defecation among toilet owners

source: SQUAT survey, 2014
it’s not about access: open defecation in households with latrines

**Females**

**Males**

**Source:** SQUAT survey, 2014
government latrines less likely to be used than privately constructed ones

source: SQUAT survey, 2014
Indian government latrine
these latrines have pits that are roughly 50 ft$^3$
privately constructed latrine pit in an Indian village
rural Indians want **big pits**

- **last a family of 6 for 5 years (WHO)**
- **Rs. 10,000 Indian government latrine (2012)**
- **median privately pit constructed in SQUAT**
- **ideal size in dominant rural narratives**
what does culture have to do with it?

**three: links between widespread open defecation and caste**
purity & pollution in India

• concept of “purity” and “pollution” organizes how people think and motivates behavior

• pollution is distinct from dirtiness, and is not always obvious to an outsider
  – sweeping is polluting; taking a bath is purifying
  – mother & baby are polluting for several weeks after birth
  – cow urine and cow dung are purifying
purity and pollution shape the social associations around latrines and their use in rural north India
barriers to using simple latrines

• latrine use means accumulating pollution near the home

• simple latrines are considered impure
  – emptying latrine pits recommended by WHO and constructed by government are equated to manual scavenging

• it would be inconceivable for Hindus, other than untouchables, to empty their own or others’ pits

• untouchables understandably seek to distance themselves from such work, a symbol of their past and continuing oppression
pulls to open defecation
defecating in the open is considered part of a wholesome rural lifestyle in which one wakes up early, goes for a walk, takes in the fresh air, and defecates
what about the few latrines that are used in rural north India?

• the latrines that are used are expensive because they have big pits
• latrine use is concentrated among the “weak” — the elderly, disabled, and young women
• working-age men are the least likely to use the latrines they have
• the latrines that exist and the patterns of use reinforce beliefs that lead to open defecation among people who cannot afford to build big pits
caste, and concepts of purity and pollution, make India unique and pose particular challenges for use of simple latrines in rural north India
what can be done to make latrine use acceptable and desirable in rural north India?
extra slides
“Yes, the *pradhan* wanted to give me a latrine, but I didn’t take it. I don’t have so much space, and as you can see I have Lord Shiva's temple in front of my house, there is also Barhamdev baba’s temple. And so if I get a latrine built here, I would not like it...Brother, I do not like that [having a latrine inside the house] either, *if these things are in the house then they pollute the house*. I really don’t like that...I am the kind of person who lives in a clean and pure place, I feel polluted in having a latrine. It gives off bad smells, the smell of dirtiness [feces] will come.”
“[By defecating in the open] one can stretch the body, one can go out for a walk. You can also prevent yourself from getting diseases. If a latrine is in the house, bad smells will come, germs will grow.

Latrines in the house are like...hell. The environment becomes completely polluted.

There is no benefit of lighting a diya, no benefit at all.”
“People here do not use latrines. They said that we’ll go early in the morning...there are orchards, there are mango trees all around. When they go there early in the morning before sunrise, when they go to defecate early in the morning, at four in the morning, waking up at four in the morning, at four...then getting up while it is still dark everyone gets some fresh air as well. This is the culture in the villages that people should at least wake up early in the morning, before sunrise, and having woken early, we should then go for a walk and then go in the fields there itself...”
“Some five to ten people in the village have latrines but they do not use it because people only use latrines who are sick and so are not able to go out and defecate in the open. Only in such a condition does a man use a latrine. Otherwise you should comfortably go, comfortably go and take in the clean outdoor environment, take in some fresh air, and then return home. Village men are strong because they work in the fields and because there they also get fresh air. If you have a latrine, and a place for bathing, and you defecate in your house, and you do not take a walk anywhere, you do not get out, then you will have pains in your body.”

22 year old man, middle caste, Nepali terai defecates in the open, has no latrine
“I do not want to go inside the latrine... one benefit of going out in open is that one can have some exercise and the second is that all the impurities of one’s breath get out... but if one eats and drinks and goes to the latrine in the house one would not live long.... this is the reason why people in the villages live long—for 100 years—and the people in the cities live only 60, 70, 80 or 85 years.”

72 year old man, lower caste, Haryana defecates in the open owns a latrine, is a retired army officer
“The pradhan made this [latrine]. If we’d made it, we’d have made it the way we wanted. All of this Indira Vikas money has come, so the pradhan has made it. But he only got a very little pit dug.

If we made it the way we wanted, then wouldn’t we have used a whole room full of bricks? How can a poor man...? It costs 20 or 25 thousand rupees [make a latrine].”

30 year old woman, low caste, Uttar Pradesh has government latrine. Children use it, she does not, will seal it when they are older.
“The [latrines] that you get from the government are no use, they are so small...their pits are so small that in two or three months they will fill up. There will be bad smells and filth in the surroundings. For Adivasi people, who don’t have much land, wouldn’t they make a house rather than a latrine? [If they made latrines] it would be dirty.”

34 year old man, middle caste, Gujarat has two latrines with large pits, uses a latrine
“[I built a latrine] because of my boy. He has polio, from childhood, it was bothersome. It was a problem, going, coming back here, going far. He couldn’t walk.”
“For the old people, like this old lady [signaling her mother-in-law] she couldn’t walk, so we made [the latrine] for her. Tell me brother, where would this old lady go? And for little kids, or if a woman has given birth and she can’t go outside. After a baby is born she will defecate inside the house.”

53 year old woman, low caste, Haryana has a latrine, sometimes uses it