confronting the challenge:
culture & sanitation
behavior in rural north India

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why do 70% of rural Indian households defecate in the open?
culture

religion

caste
purity & pollution in India

• concept of “purity” and “pollution” organize how people think, and are widely acknowledged to motivate behavior

• pollution means “dirtiness” and “badness,” but not always in ways that are 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 are especially important in rural areas
caste & untouchability

• about 80% of Indians are Hindu
• Hinduism organizes people into ranked castes, into which people are born
  – higher caste people are seen as more pure than lower caste people
• people from the untouchable castes are seen as permanently polluted, and are extremely marginalized and oppressed
  – the lowest ranking castes within the untouchable castes clean up human feces
caste & untouchability

• non-untouchable people believe that they become polluted by contact/association with untouchables or their work

• becoming “polluted” has social consequences, even economic, for middle and high caste people
research methodology
data collection & analysis

• **data:** 100 qualitative interviews
  – purposely sampled villages (about 20) in 4 regions
  – **one third:** every household member defecates in the open
  – **two thirds:** have at least one person who switched from open defecation to regular latrine use in the last 10 years
  – 60-90 minute **recorded** interviews in Hindi, Gujarati and Bhojpuri
  – interviews in teams of 2 or 3
pushes from latrine use

latrine use means **accumulating pollution and impurity** near the home

caste & untouchability mean that **pit emptying** presents special challenges that are not similarly present in other societies
“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.”

45 year old man, high caste Hindu, Uttar Pradesh defecates in the open was offered a government latrine and refused
“[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.**”

22 year old man, high caste Hindu, Haryana defecates in the open
caste, pollution, and cleaning feces
pit size & pit emptying in rural north India

• people believe latrine pits recommended by WHO and constructed by government will fill much more quickly than is the case
  – such latrine pits are equated to manual scavenging

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

• untouchability means laws of supply & demand don’t apply to pit emptying in the same ways they might in other places:
  – no one other than untouchables would take the job
  – untouchables try to distance themselves from such work, even if it were remunerative
summary: pushes from latrine use

• accumulating feces near one’s home is seen as importantly polluting

• in rural north India, many people reject latrines and latrine use – especially government latrines with internationally recommended pit sizes

• pit emptying is associated with ritual pollution of the socially worst kind
pulls to open defecation

open defecation is part of a wholesome healthy rural life
“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.”
summary: pulls to open defecation

• open defecation is seen to be part of a wholesome rural life

• open defecation signifies strength and good health

• many people regret being too old or weak to defecate in the open
what about the few latrines that are built and used in rural north India?

latrines that are “worth using” are expensive – most of the extra cost is due to globally large pits

latrine use is concentrated among “weak” people

the latrines that exist & patterns of use reinforce the beliefs that lead to open defecation among “regular” villagers
how do big pits reinforce open defecation?

Imagine you’re a “regular guy” in an Indian village, deciding whether to build a latrine for your household.
how do big pits reinforce open defecation?

Latrines are impure and polluting...

... some wealthy & educated people build expensive latrines with large septic tanks that will not have to be cleaned, and thus avoid pollution...

... “regular” men like you see this effort and expense, and conclude that affordable latrines really are inferior and polluting...

... since you can’t afford such a large septic tank, you conclude that latrine use is not for you.
“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
Latrine use in the switching study

- 56% of households with a latrine have at least one person who defecates in open use

- Use is concentrated among "weak" people: the elderly, the disabled, and young women

- Working aged men, who make household decisions, are least likely to use available latrines
“[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
how do patterns of use reinforce open defecation, considering that working-aged men make decisions?

Latrines are for the weak (OD is for the strong)...

... some wealthy people can afford to build latrines that ward off pollution and make life more convenient for the weak members of their family & the women who clean up after them...

... “regular” men can’t afford such luxuries...

... the weak people in your family must put up with open defecation, much as they do other inconveniences & indignities of rural life.
summary

1. explicit rejection of latrines & latrine use
   – affordable latrines with internationally recommended (& government provided) pits are seen as **polluting**
   – pit emptying is associated with social pollution of the worst kind

2. strong pro-open defecation social norms
   – people believe open defecation is part of a healthy, **wholesome** rural life

3. the toilets people in rural India demand, and the way they are used, are **reflective of and reinforce** the very beliefs that lead to widespread open defecation
open defecation and latrine use have unique, culturally influenced meanings in rural north India

what can be done to change what it means to use a simple, affordable latrine in rural north India?
extra slides
Hindus are more likely to consider a latrine near the house to be impure than Muslims.

Source: SQUAT survey
Aversion to government latrines is concentrated among Hindus.
purposive sampling

• **region**: chose 4 regions for socioeconomic and sanitation diversity
• **district**: chose 1 district per region in which the change in rural OD best matched the state change from 2001-2011
• **village**: chose 4-5 villages per district in which the DLHS 2 sanitation was closest to the 2011 sanitation for the state (randomly in Nepal)
• **household**: chose 4-6 households per village using field randomization as in the ASER survey
context: four study regions

- Nepal
- Uttar Pradesh
- India
- Gujarat
- Haryana

- Open Defecation (%)
- Adult Female Literacy (%)
- Per Capita GDP ($)
prior work recognizes cultural roots of rural India’s open defecation problem

• O’Reilly, 2014; Ahmed et al., 2010; Srinivas, 1976

• V.S. Naipaul: *An Area of Darkness*

• Gandhi

• we believe that we are the first to do a **rigorous qualitative study** advancing culture as an explanation for sanitation behavior in this region
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what can’t explain it?

poverty

education

water access
what we have seen this morning about open defecation in rural India

• open defecation despite latrine access

• the other Indian sanitation exception: missing “middle rungs” on the sanitation ladder

• pit size predicts latrine use
culture

- beliefs
- values
- norms
- meaning