Link between Sanitation and Stunting

What is the issue?

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Results of different studies involving the impact of sanitation on stunting has implications for India.

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What is Stunting?

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- Stunting is a complex problem which is related to the low height of the children with respective to their age.
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- The factors which believed to implicate stunting are prenatal health, breastfeeding and diet.
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- Researchers have homed in on an alternative hypothesis, that poor sanitation plays a greater role in stunting, because faecal bacteria and parasites deprive the child of nutrition.
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- Various trails showed that intestinal inflammation, possibly caused by exposure to faecal germs, is correlated with stunting.
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- Children in richer South Asian countries are shorter on average than those in poorer Sub-Saharan African countries, and no intervention so far has closed this gap.
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- Much of the height variation among those regions could be explained by differences in open defecation rates
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What was the results of the study conducted in this regard?

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- WASH, this study was made with trials, which implemented water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) interventions in Bangladeshi and Kenyan villages for two years.
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- The WASH interventions included replacing poor-quality toilets with improved ones, chlorinating drinking water, and promoting hand washing.
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- This was an effort to prevent stunting (low height for age) seen in children under two years in developing countries.
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- When the trials ended, researchers found these children were not taller than those who did not receive these interventions, this is because the study required atleast two generation of trails.
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- The findings are a setback to the hypothesis that improving sanitation can thwart childhood stunting, but the findings has given various insights on developing countries.
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What are the important insights of the study?

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- India is the only country today in which over 50% of the rural population still defecates in the open.
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- Bangladesh, while close to India in population density, brought down open defecation rates from 42% in 2003 to just 1% in 2016.
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- Only around 3-9% of the participants in the trial in Bangladesh, and less than 5% in the trial in Kenya, defecated in the open.
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- Even in countries like Bangladesh, poor-quality toilets can cause heavy faecal contamination, Villages saw high rates of both contamination and stunting
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- The study also showed that open defecation had a stronger impact on height when population density was higher, as is the case of India.

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What are the implications for India?

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- India introduced Swatch Bharat Abhiyan (SBA) to eliminate open defecation by 2019.
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- National Family Health Survey reports shows that open defecation still remains quite common in rural India and its distribution across districts looked pretty similar to 2011.
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- This proves India’s Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA) it is difficult to change people’s sanitation habits.
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- Thus programmes like the SBA that focus on constructing toilets can’t do much in the face of deep-rooted cultural beliefs about open defecation.
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- If behavioural change campaigns are not initiated to tackle the problem, Indians will continue to defecate in the open even if they get toilets for free.
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- Against this backdrop, the Bangladesh study is significant because it did succeed in changing participant behaviour.
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Source: The Hindu

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