Making India Open Defecation-Free

What is the issue?

- Speaking in Gujarat on the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared India “open defecation-free”.
- It is time to reflect if rural India is truly open defecation-free and consider having a sanitation policy for those who continue to use the outdoors.

What is the claim?

- October 2, 2019, besides being Mahatma Gandhi’s 150th birth anniversary, is the fifth, and perhaps final, the anniversary of the Swachh Bharat Mission.
- The Swachh Bharat Mission website claims with some documents that the country has achieved 100% coverage of latrine ownership.

What is the true state?

- Between 2014 and the end of 2018, latrine ownership in a survey area in Bihar, U.P., Rajasthan and M.P. had increased by 34 percentage points.
- Yet, even in states that had already been declared open defecation-free, the actual coverage was far below 100%.
- The percentage of people defecating in the open declined by 26 percentage points.
- However, close to half still reported being open defecating.
- More worryingly, the programme barely managed to bring any change in the behaviour of latrine owners.
- Like in 2014, about a quarter of people who own a functional latrine continued to defecate in the open.
- Overall, the survey found that 44% of people in these 4 States defecated in the open.

What is the concern?

- In the past 5 years, the Indian government has built 100 million toilets.
- With a country as large as India, this is a big achievement.
- However, the means adopted for achieving this reveal the darker side of the Swachh Bharat Mission achievements.
- Hard-working government officials convincing people to build and use a

latrine might be half the story.
- The mission beneficiaries, as well as government officials at every level, faced immense pressure and threats.
- Many rural Indians were threatened with or even denied their legal rights, such as PDS ration, Kisan Credit Cards, for not building a latrine.
- Officials resorted to threats of fines and jail terms to intimidate people in some places.

What is the way forward?

- With unrealistic targets pushed down from the top, the sanitation policy under the Swachh Bharat Mission had been a coercive one.
- The real need now is a 'non-coercive sanitation policy' that will address the remaining who openly defecate.

Source: The Hindu

