Open Defecation and Caste Attitudes

What is the issue?

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- The recently released “Health of the Nation’s States” report highlights the uneven progress made by India’s states in improving public health.
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- The likelihood of the average Indian falling sick due to unsafe water and poor sanitation is 40 times higher than in China.
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- This calls for an increased attention to the problem of open defecation.
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How serious is open defecation?

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- Strikingly, more than half the population of the country defecate in open fields and by the roadsides.
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- Resultantly, water supplies in rural India get contaminated with this.
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- This in turn contributes to repeated spells of diarrhoea and widespread maternal and child malnutrition.
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- The resulting “stunting” and “wasting” causes the tragedy of millions of Indian children growing up physically smaller.
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- And with inherent reduced learning abilities even before they enter the schools.
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- As a follow up of this is the reduced potential of workforce when these undernourished children get into the working age population.
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What perpetuates open defecation?

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- Some observations reveal that it was not poverty, illiteracy or a lack of water that impeded the use of toilets.
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- Evidently, according to the 2011 Census, about half of rural households that had no toilets had water facilities.
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- Similarly, in about half of households where one member has completed school, the practice of defecating outside continued.
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- More than 80% of countries with worse literacy rates than India’s have lower percentages of people defecating outside.
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- In India, it is the notion of purity and cleanliness, associated with caste, that actually makes households unwilling to have a toilet at home.
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- The perceptions of caste hierarchy, people's roles, etc hinder communities from opting out of open defecation.
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- Most villagers are unwilling to close and then empty inexpensive open-pit latrines for reuse, even long after the contents have decomposed into compost.
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What is desired?

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- Promoting social equality is indeed a prerequisite for achieving India's goals on open defecation free environment.
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- Before insisting on building toilets, the social attitudes about caste and cleanliness have to be changed.
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Source: Business Standard

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