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Out of the loo: Maximum Indians head for the fields

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NEW DELHI: India has the highest number of people who defecate in the open. Numbers released on Thursday by the World Health Organisation and UNICEF revealed that 1.2 billion people practise open defecation globally — 83% of whom live in 13 countries including India.

In sheer numbers, 665 million Indians defecate in the open followed by 66 million in Indonesia, 52 million in Ethiopia, 50 million in Pakistan, 37 million in China, 29 million in Nigeria and 18 million each in Brazil and Bangladesh.

The report — 'Progress on Sanitation' — said 18% of the world's population practised open defecation. However, only 13% of them live in urban areas.

According to the report, open defecation was more a rural phenomenon, practised by over a billion rural inhabitants. In developing regions, more than 1 out of 3 rural dwellers defecated in the open.

The report said open defecation was six times more frequent in rural than in urban areas. Data released on Thursday added that 31% of the world's rural population practised open defecation with the problem being acute in southern Asia where 63% (778 million) people indulged in such a practice.

In contrast, the number stood at 23% of the rural population in Latin America and the Caribbean and 14% in West Asia. The report said, "The proportion of people practising open defecation has decreased in developing regions — dropping from 31% in 1990 to 23% in 2006. Despite the drop in percentage terms, population growth means that the number of people practising open defecation has changed little since 1990."

It added, "Open defecation is the last recourse for those without any form of sanitation. Those at the bottom of the sanitation ladder must endure the daily indignity of defecating in the open, often in publicly accessible spaces. Open defecation is of fundamental importance to development because of the health hazard it poses.

If some members of a community continue to defecate in the open, then the whole community is at greater risk of diarrhoeal diseases, worm infestations and hepatitis." According to the report, every day, over 2.5 billion people suffered from a lack of access to improved sanitation — 1.5 billion of them being from Asia alone. In India, improved sanitation facilities have increased from just 14% in 1990 to 28% in 2006. Just around 2 lakh people gained access to improved sanitation between 1990-2006.

Poor sanitation threatens children's survival as a faecally-contaminated environment is directly linked to diarrhoeal disease, one of the biggest killers of infants under the age of five.

"At current trends, the world will fall short of the millennium sanitation target by more than 700 million people," said Ann M Veneman, UNICEF executive director. "Without dramatic improvements, much will be lost," she added.

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