

India: Land of many cell phones, fewer toilets

The Associated Press

MUMBAI, India (AP) -- The Mumbai slum of Rafiq Nagar has no clean water for its shacks made of ripped tarp and bamboo. No garbage pickup along the rocky, pocked earth that serves as a road. No power except from haphazard cables strung overhead illegally.

And not a single toilet or latrine for its 10,000 people.

Yet nearly every destitute family in the slum has a cell phone. Some have three.

When President Barack Obama visits India Nov. 6, he will find a country of startlingly uneven development and perplexing disparities, where more people have cell phones than access to a toilet, according to the United Nations.

It is a country buoyed by a vibrant business world of call centers and software developers, but hamstrung by a bloated, corrupt government that has failed to deliver the barest of services.

Its estimated growth rate of 8.5 percent a year is among the highest in the world, but its roads are crumbling.

It offers cheap, world-class medical care to Western tourists at private hospitals, yet has some of the worst child mortality and maternal death rates outside sub-Saharan Africa.

And while tens of millions have benefited from India's rise, many more remain mired in some of the worst poverty in the world.

Businessman Mukesh Ambani, the world's fourth-richest person, is just finishing off a new \$1 billion skyscraper-house in Mumbai with 27 floors and three helipads, touted as the most expensive home on earth. Yet farmers still live in shacks of mud and cow dung.

The cell phone frenzy bridges all worlds. Cell phones are sold amid the Calvin Klein and Clinique stores under the soaring atriums of India's new malls, and in the crowded markets of its working-class neighborhoods. Bare shops in the slums sell pre-paid cards for as little as 20 cents next to packets of chewing tobacco, while street hawkers peddle car chargers at traffic lights.

The spartan Beecham's in New Delhi's Connaught Place, one of the country's seemingly ubiquitous mobile phone dealers, is overrun with lunchtime customers of all classes looking for everything from a 35,000 rupee (\$790) Blackberry Torch to a basic 1,150 rupee (\$26) Nokia.

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Store manager Sanjeev Malhotra adds to a decades-old - and still unfulfilled - Hindi campaign slogan promising food, clothing and shelter. "Roti, kapda, makaan" and "mobile," he riffs, laughing. "Basic needs."

There were more than 670 million cell phone connections in India by the end of August, a number that has been growing by close to 20 million a month, according to government figures.

Yet U.N. figures show that only 366 million Indians have access to a private toilet or latrine, leaving 665 million to defecate in the open.

"At least tap water and sewage disposal - how can we talk about any development without these two fundamental things? How can we talk about development without health and education?" says Anita Patil-Deshmukhi, executive director of PUKAR, an organization that conducts research and outreach in the slums of Mumbai.

India's leaders say they are sympathetic to the problem.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, an economist credited with unleashing India's private sector by loosening government regulation, talks about growth that benefits the masses of poor people as well as a burgeoning middle class of about 300 million. He describes a roaring Maoist insurgency in the east - which feeds in large part on the poor's discontent - as the country's biggest internal security threat.

Sonia Gandhi, chief of the ruling Congress Party, has pushed laws guaranteeing a right to food and education, as well as a gargantuan rural jobs program for nearly 100 million people. But as many as 800 million Indians still live on less than \$2 a day, even as Mumbai's stock exchange sits near record highs.

Many fear the situation is unsustainable.

"Everybody understands the threat. Everybody recognizes that there is a gap, that this could be the thing that trips up this country," says Anand Mahindra, vice chairman and managing director of the Mahindra & Mahindra manufacturing company.

Private companies have tried to fill that gap, and Tata sells a 749 rupee (\$16) water purifier for the poor. Mafias provide water and electricity to slum dwellers at a cost far higher than what wealthy Indians pay for basic services.

"For every little thing, we have to pay," says Nusrat Khan, a 35-year-old maid and single parent who raises her four children on less than 3,000 rupees (\$67) a month and blames the government for her lack of access to water and a toilet.

The government is spending \$350 million a year to build toilets in rural areas. Bindeshwar Pathak, the founder of the Sulabh Sanitation and Social Reform Movement, estimates the country needs about 120 million more latrines - likely the largest sanitation project in world history.

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"Those in power, only they can change the situation," says Pathak, who claims to have helped build a million low-cost latrines across India over the past 40 years. "India can achieve this - if it desires."

In the slums of Mumbai, home to more than half the city's population of 14 million, the yearning for toilets is so great that enterprising residents have built makeshift outhouses on their own.

In Annabhau Sathe Nagar, a raised latrine of corrugated tin empties into a river of sewage that children splash in and adults wade across. The slum in east Mumbai has about 50,000 residents and a single toilet building, with 10 pay toilets for men and eight for women - two of which are broken.

With the wait for those toilets up to an hour even at 5 a.m., and the two-rupee (4-cent) fee too expensive for many, most people either use a field or wait to use the toilets at work, says Santosh Thorat, 32, a community organizer. Nearly 60 percent have developed piles from regularly waiting to defecate, he says.

Conditions are far worse in Rafiq Nagar, a crowded, 15-year-old slum on the lip of a 110-acre garbage dump.

Most of the slum dwellers are ragpickers who sort through heaps of trash for scraps of plastic, glass, metal, even bones, anything they can sell to recyclers for cash. A pungent brew of ripe garbage and sewage blows through the trash-strewn streets, as choking smoke from wood fires rolls out the doorways of windowless huts. Children, half clothed in rags, play hopscotch next to a mysterious gray liquid that has gathered in stagnant puddles weeks after the last rainfall.

Just beside the shacks, men and women defecate in separate areas behind rolling hills of green foliage that have sprung up over the garbage. Children run through those hills, flying kites.

Khatija Sheikh, 20, splurges to use a pay toilet in another neighborhood 10 minutes away, but is never sure what condition it will be in.

"Sometimes it's clean, sometimes it's dirty. It's totally dependent on the owner's mood," says Sheikh, whose two young children use the street. Her home is less than five feet from an elevated outhouse built by a neighbor that drops sewage next to her walls.

Since there are no water pipes or wells here, residents are forced to rely on the water mafia for water for cooking, washing clothes, bathing and drinking. The neighborhood is rife with skin infections, tuberculosis and other ailments.

A large blue barrel outside a home is filled with murky brown water, tiny white worms and an aluminum drinking cup. To fill up two jerry cans costs between 40 (\$.90) and 50 (\$1.10) rupees a day, about one-third of the average family's earnings here.

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"If the government would give us water, we would pay that money to the government," said Suresh Pache, 41, a motorized rickshaw driver.

Instead, it has issued demolition notices throughout the slum, which sits illegally on government land. Pache, whose home was razed 10 times, jokes that the destruction is the only government service he can count on.

Yet the world of technology has embraced the slum dwellers with its cheap cell phones and cut-rate calling plans that charge a sliver of a penny a minute. Pache bought his first phone for 1,400 rupees (\$31) four months ago. Since then, his wife, a ragpicker, found two other broken models as she scoured the garbage dump, and he paid to have them repaired.

He speaks with fluency about the different plans offered by Tata, Reliance and Idea that cost him a total of 300 rupees (\$6.70) a month. Now, when his rickshaw breaks down, he can alert his wife with a call. She uses her phone to tell the recyclers where she is in the dump so they can drive out to her, saving her the time and effort of dragging her bag of scraps to them.

Mohan Singh, a 58-year-old bicycle repairman, says his son uses their 2,000 rupee (\$45) Orpat phone to play music and talk to relatives. Thorat, the community organizer, shows photographs of his neighborhood and videos of a pre-school he started on his Nokia cameraphone, while his second phone rings in his pocket. Sushila Paten, who teaches at the pre-school, organizes a phone chain with her Samsung to instantly mobilize hundreds of people in the streets when violent thugs show up demanding "rent" from the squatters.

In fact, the spread of cell phones may end up bringing toilets.

R. Gopalakrishnan, executive director of Tata Sons, one of India's most revered companies, says the rising aspirations of the poor, buttressed by their growing access to communications and information, will put tremendous pressure on the government to start delivering.

People already are starting to challenge local officials who for generations answered to no one, he says.

"I think there are very, very dramatic changes happening," he says.

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