

# what explains widespread open defecation in India?

links between widespread open defecation and culture

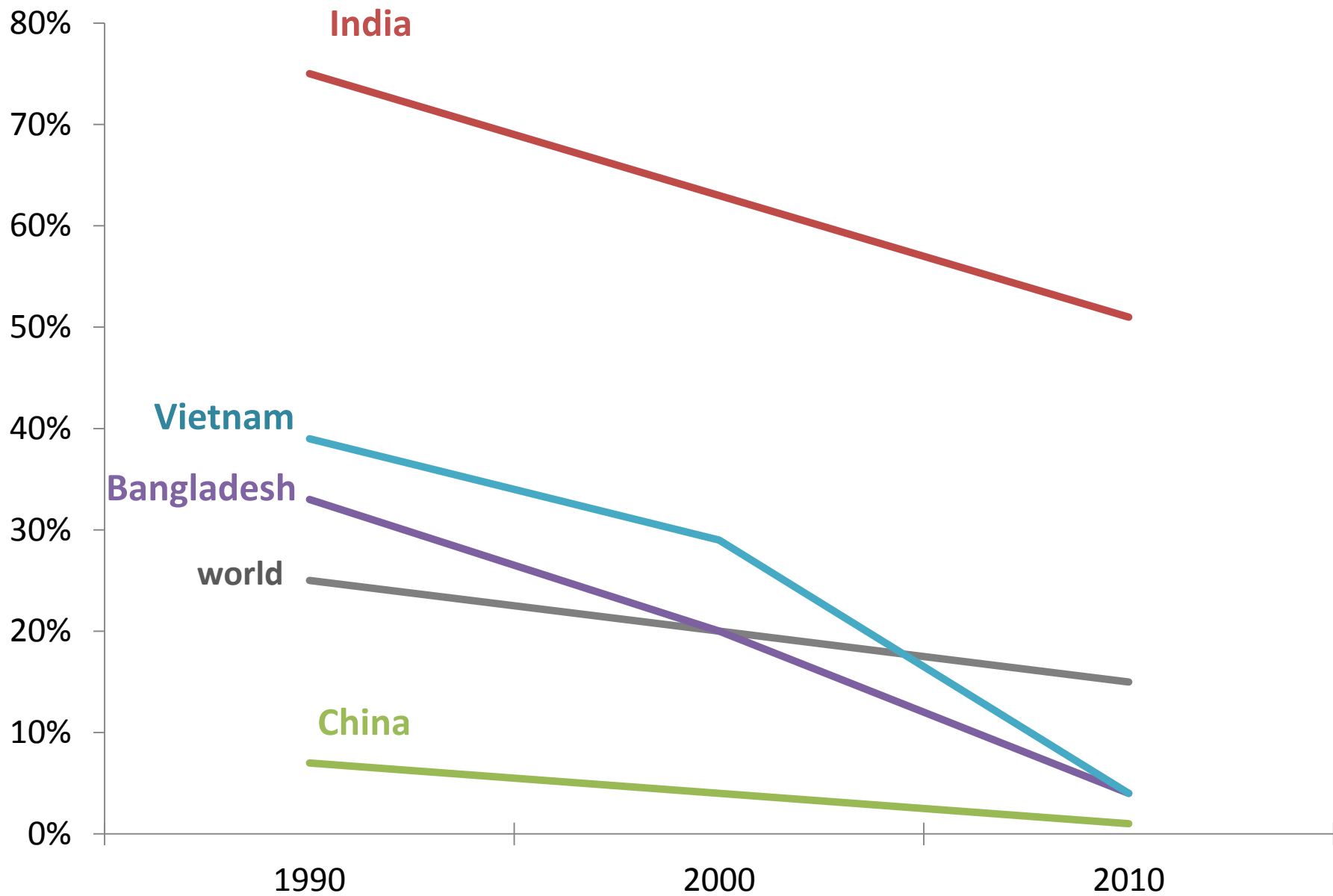
**Sangita Vyas & Dean Spears**

**@NEEDLE\_2015**

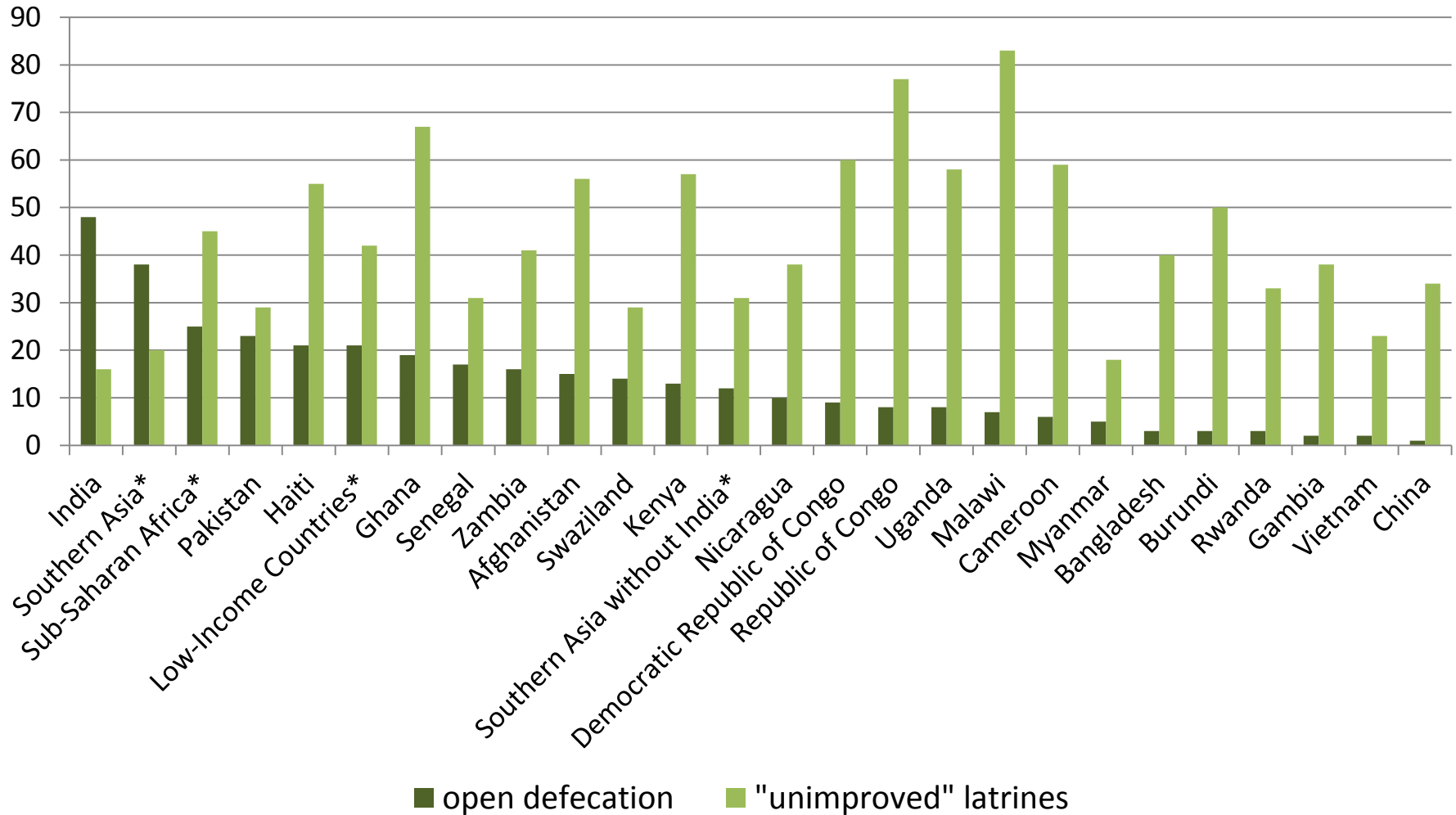
**5 February 2015**



research institute  
for compassionate  
economics



# the other Indian exception: little use of simple latrines



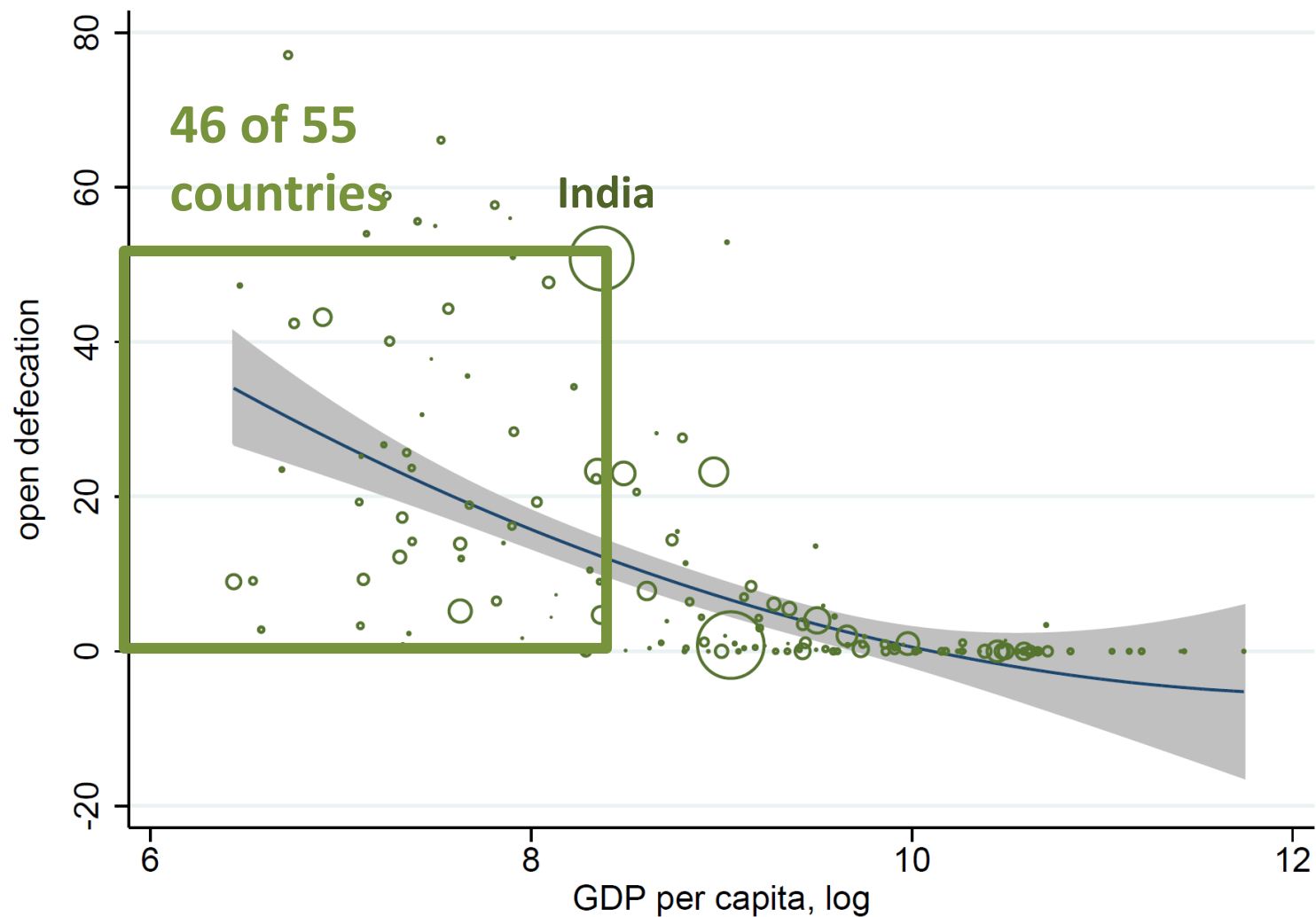
**what makes India different?**



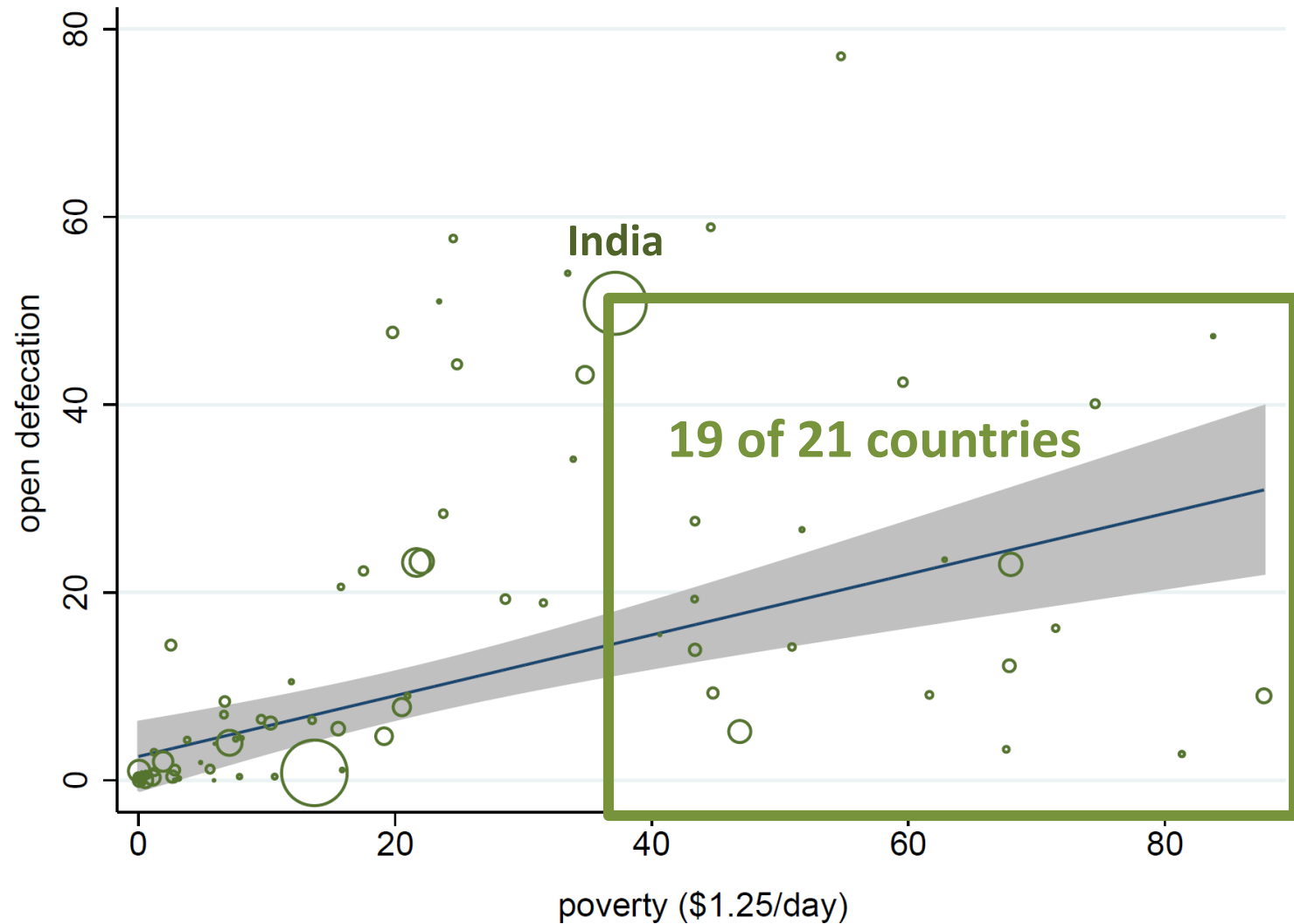
can other development indicators explain widespread open defecation in India?

**one: India is an outlier**

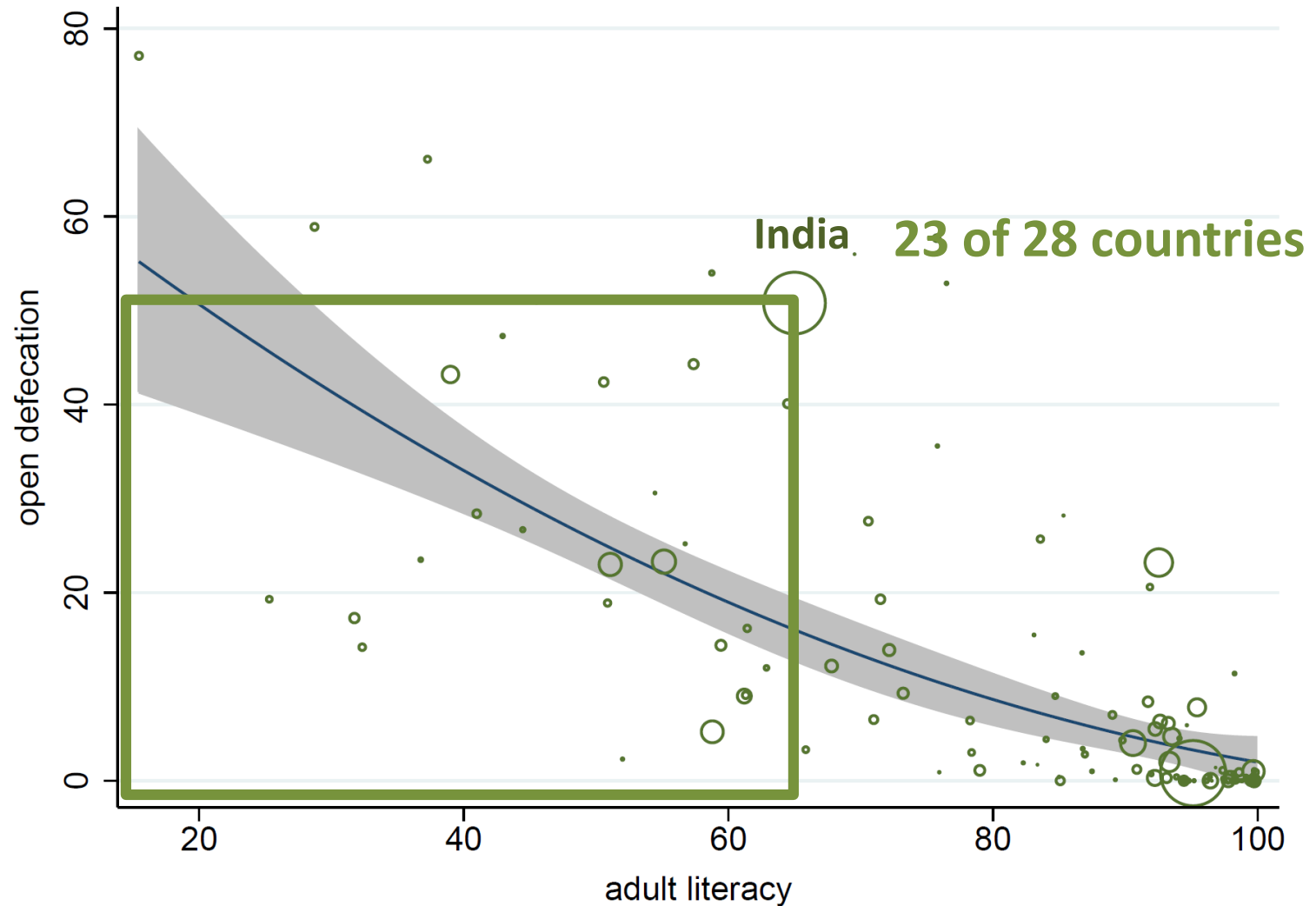
# it's not because of income



# it's not because of poverty

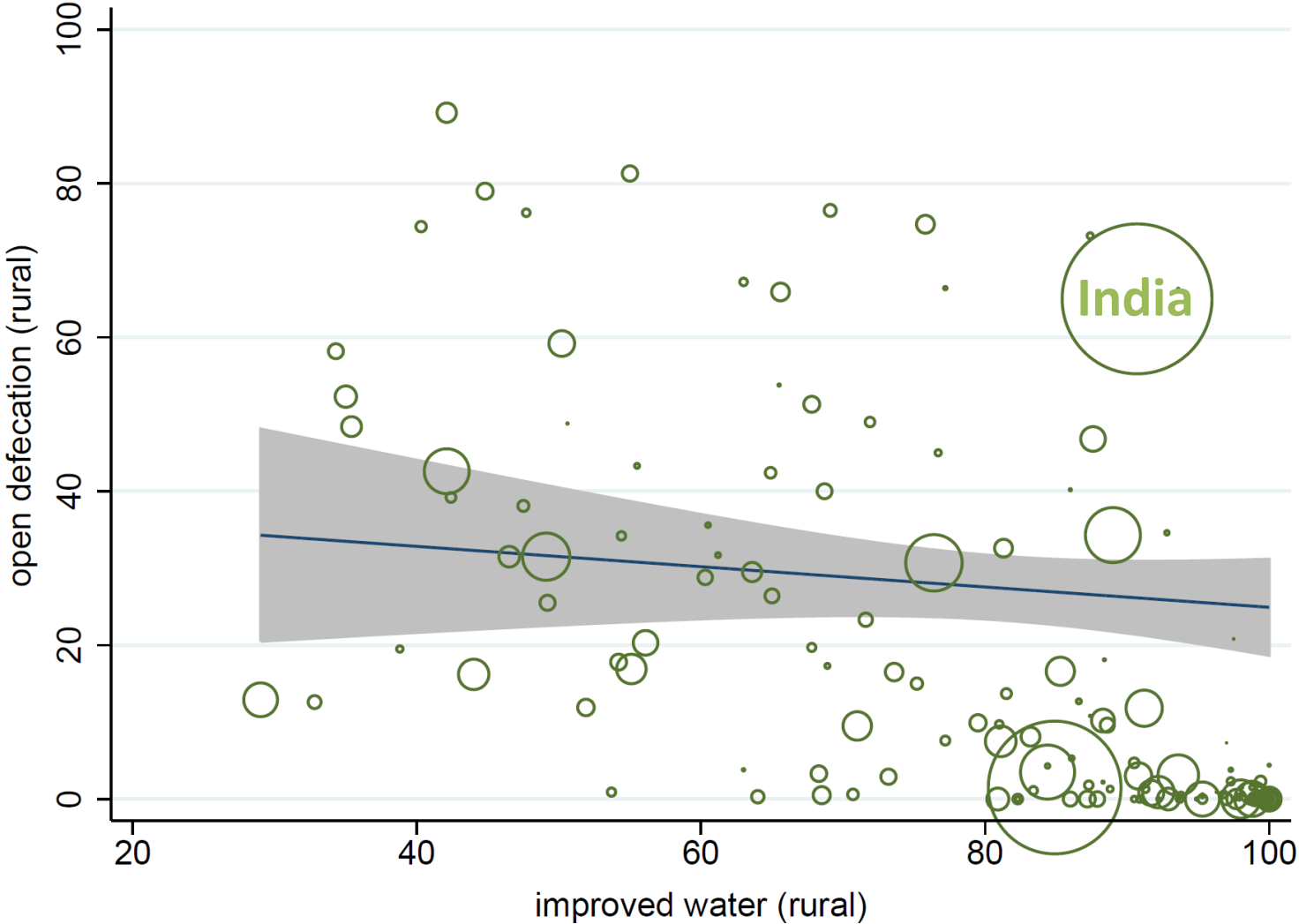


# it's not about education





# it's not about water: **rural only**





what do rural north Indians think about open defecation and latrine use?

**two: two studies of attitudes and behaviors**

# research methodology

## SQUAT

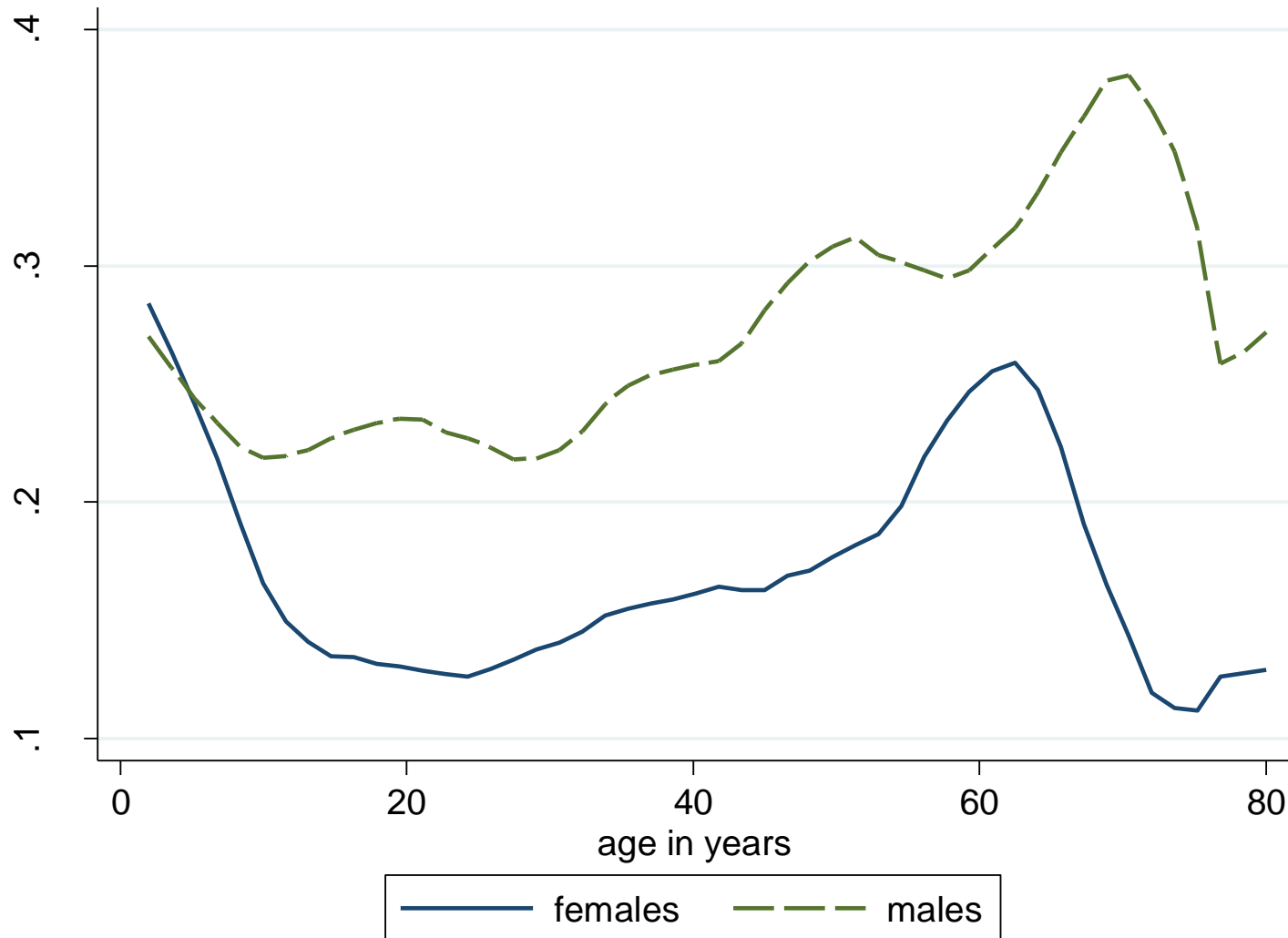
- quantitative, structured interviews
- 3,200 rural households
- 5 states of north India

## Switching

- qualitative, semi-structured interviews
- 100 rural households
- 4 regions

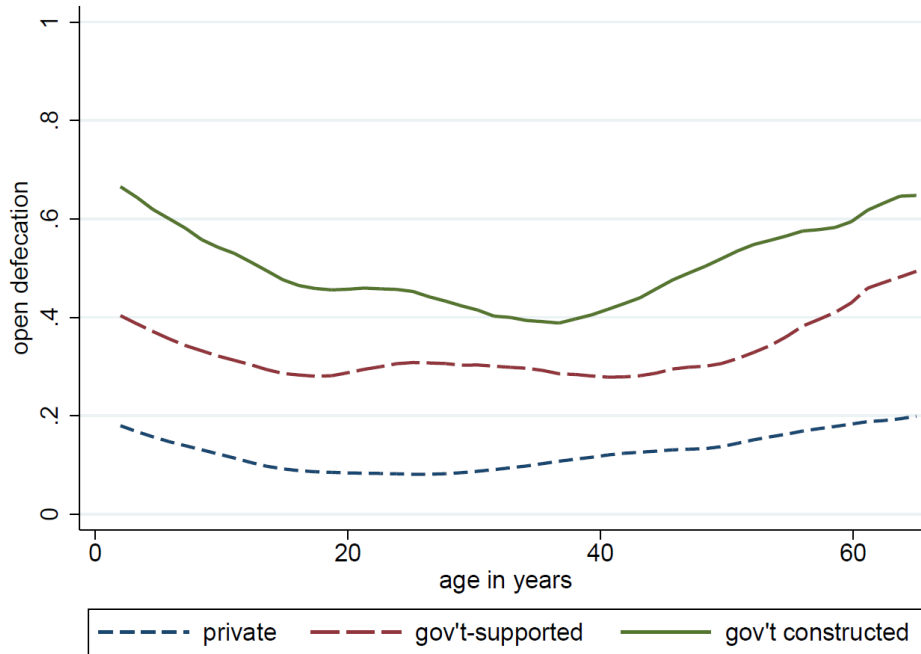
study areas contain  
**one-third of global open defecation**

# it's not about access: open defecation among toilet owners

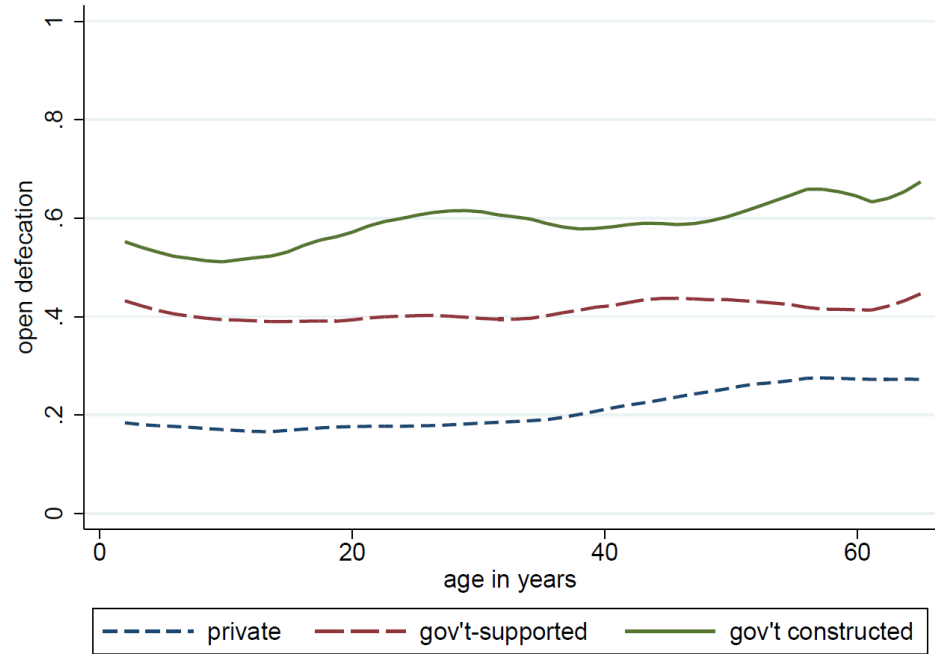


# it's not about access: open defecation in households with latrines

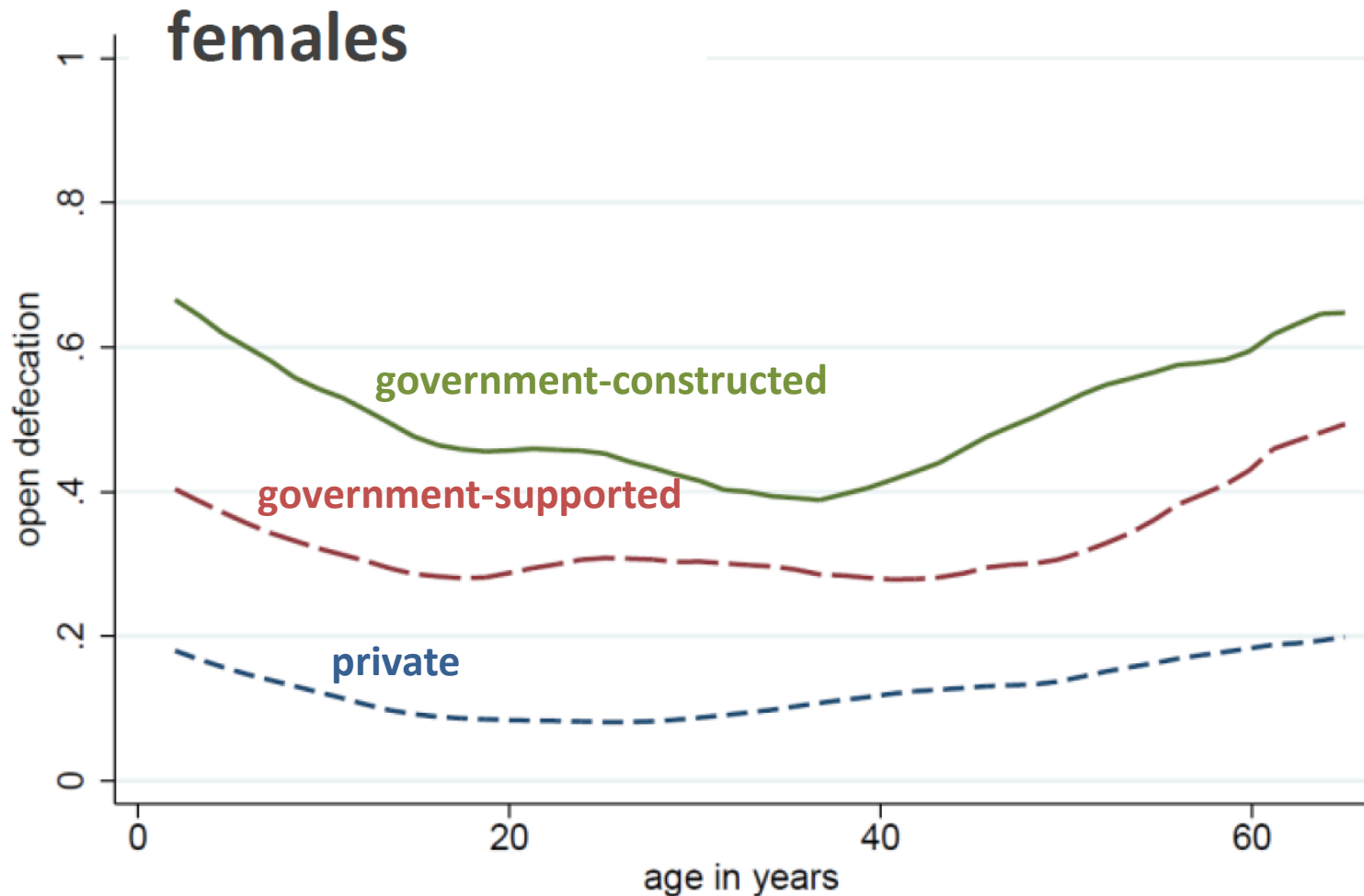
females



males



# government latrines **less likely** to be used than privately constructed ones





Indian government latrine



← Kenya



Bangladesh →

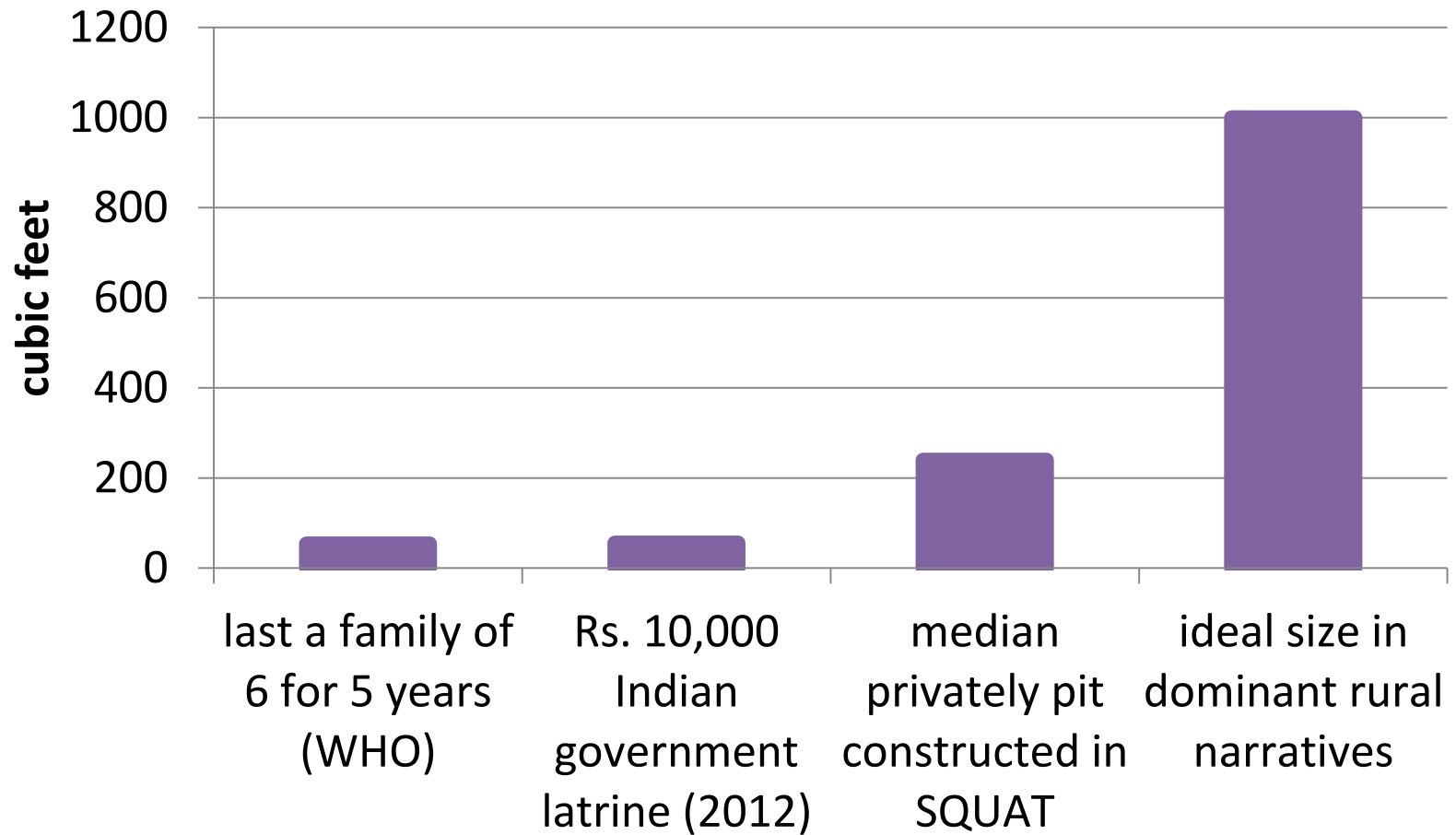


these latrines have pits that are  
roughly **50 ft<sup>3</sup>**



privately  
constructed  
latrine pit in  
an Indian  
village

# rural Indians want **big pits**





what does culture have to do with it?

**three: links between widespread  
open defecation and caste**

# purity & pollution in India

- concept of “purity” and “pollution” organizes how people think and motivates behavior
- pollution is distinct from dirtiness, and is not always obvious to an outsider
  - sweeping is polluting ; taking a bath is purifying
  - mother & baby are polluting for several weeks after birth
  - cow urine and cow dung are purifying

**purity and pollution shape the social  
associations around latrines and their use in  
rural north India**

# barriers to using simple latrines

- latrine use means accumulating pollution near the home
- simple latrines are considered impure
  - emptying latrine pits recommended by WHO and constructed by government are equated to manual scavenging
- it would be inconceivable for Hindus, other than untouchables, to empty their own or others' pits
- untouchables understandably seek to distance themselves from such work, a symbol of their past and continuing oppression





# pulls to open defecation



defecating in the open is considered part of a **wholesome rural lifestyle** in which one wakes up early, goes for a walk, takes in the fresh air, and defecates

# what about the few latrines that are used in rural north India?

- the latrines that are used are expensive because they have big pits
- latrine use is concentrated among the “weak” – the elderly, disabled, and young women
- working-age men are the least likely to use the latrines they have
- the latrines that exist and the patterns of use reinforce beliefs that lead to open defecation among people who cannot afford to build big pits

**caste, and concepts of purity and  
pollution, make India unique and pose  
particular challenges for use of simple  
latrines in rural north India**

**what can be done to make latrine use  
acceptable and desirable in rural north  
India?**

extra slides

“Yes, the *pradhan* wanted to give me a latrine, but I didn’t take it. I don’t have so much space, and as you can see I have Lord Shiva's temple in front of my house, there is also Barhamdev baba’s temple. And so if I get a latrine built here, I would not like it...Brother, I do not like that [having a latrine inside the house] either, **if these things are in the house then they pollute the house.** I really don’t like that...I am the kind of person who lives in a clean and pure place, I feel polluted in having a latrine. It gives off bad smells, the smell of dirtiness [feces] will come.”

45 year old man, high caste Hindu, Uttar Pradesh  
defecates in the open  
was offered a government latrine and refused

“[By defecating in the open] one can stretch the body, one can go out for a walk. You can also prevent yourself from getting diseases. If a latrine is in the house, bad smells will come, germs will grow.

Latrines in the house are like...hell. The environment becomes completely polluted.

**There is no benefit of lighting a *diya*, no benefit at all.”**



22 year old man, high caste Hindu, Haryana  
defecates in the open

“People here do not use latrines. They said that we’ll go early in the morning...there are orchards, there are mango trees all around. When they go there early in the morning before sunrise, when they go to defecate early in the morning, at four in the morning, waking up at four in the morning, at four...then getting up while it is still dark everyone gets some **fresh air** as well. This is the culture in the villages that **people should at least wake up early in the morning**, before sunrise, and having woken early, we should then go for a walk and then go in the fields there itself...”



“Some five to ten people in the village have latrines but they do not use it because people only use latrines who are **sick** and so are **not able to go out and defecate** in the open. Only in such a condition does a man use a latrine. Otherwise you should comfortably go, comfortably go and take in the **clean** outdoor environment, take in some **fresh air**, and then return home. Village men are **strong** because they work in the fields and because there they also get fresh air. If you have a latrine, and a place for bathing, and you defecate in your house, and you do not take a walk anywhere, you do not get out, then you will have pains in your body.”

22 year old man, middle caste, Nepali terai defecates in the open, has no latrine

“I do not want to go inside the latrine... one benefit of going out in open is that one can have some exercise and the second is that all the impurities of one’s breath get out... but if one eats and drinks and goes to the latrine in the house one would not live long.... this is the reason why people in the villages live long—for 100 years—and the people in the cities live only 60, 70, 80 or 85 years.”



72 year old man, lower caste, Haryana  
defecates in the open  
owns a latrine, is a retired army officer



“The *pradhan* made this [latrine]. If we’d made it, we’d have made it the way we wanted. All of this *Indira Vikas* money has come, so the *pradhan* has made it. But he only got a very little pit dug.

If we made it the way we wanted, then wouldn’t we have used a whole room full of bricks? How can a poor man...? It costs 20 or 25 thousand rupees [make a latrine].”

30 year old woman, low caste, Uttar Pradesh  
has government latrine  
children use it, she does not, will seal it when they are older

“The [latrines] that you get from the government are no use, they are so small...their pits are so small that in two or three months they will fill up. There will be bad smells and filth in the surroundings. For Adivasi people, who don't have much land, wouldn't they make a house rather than a latrine? [If they made latrines] it would be dirty.”

34 year old man, middle caste, Gujarat  
has two latrines with large pits, uses a latrine

“[I built a latrine] because of my boy. He has polio, from childhood, it was bothersome. It was a problem, going, coming back here, going far. He couldn’t walk.”

50 year old woman, low caste, Uttar Pradesh  
has a latrine, does not use it

“For the old people, like this old lady [signaling her mother-in-law] she couldn’t walk, so we made [the latrine] for her. Tell me brother, where would this old lady go? And for little kids, or if a woman has given birth and she can’t go outside. After a baby is born she will defecate inside the house.”

53 year old woman, low caste, Haryana  
has a latrine, sometimes uses it