

Failing the third toilet test: Reflections on fieldwork, gender and Indian loos

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journals.sagepub.com/home/eth**Kathinka Frøystad**

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Abstract

This article reexamines the long-standing corridor topic of toilet facilities in anthropological fieldwork, arguing that their condition has stronger methodological implications than previously acknowledged. Drawing on personal experiences from three successive fieldworks in one of India's poorest states – Uttar Pradesh – it reflects on the importance of gender, age, and prior experience with unfamiliar sanitary facilities in shaping our adjustment to the conditions we meet in the field. It narrates the three 'toilet tests' to which the author has been exposed over a series of field visits: the transition to water, squatting, and ultimately the lack of privacy. Failing the latter, she had to shelve a promising fieldwork lead. Scaling up, the article suggests that, if field sites with 'difficult' toilet conditions attract fewer and differently positioned anthropologists, the result is likely to be a bias in coverage and theory-building that merits more reflection.

Keywords

India, toilet, fieldwork, gender, age, participant observation, Uttar Pradesh, women, Swachh Bharat, ethnography

Introduction

The Indian film *Toilet: A Love Story* (2017) has an unusual plot. Its main character, Jaya, has just got married. When reaching the rural house of her groom and

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his family, where the regional kinship norms prescribe her to live from now on, she discovers that it has no toilet. Instead she is made to go to the fields to relieve herself. Her father-in-law, a staunch Brahman, is dead against having a toilet at home, which he claims would bring ritual impurity and misfortune to the house. Initially Jaya copes by stealthy visits to the loo of a neighbour and using the lavatory on a train that halts nearby. Eventually she leaves home in frustration. But then hope returns: the Government of India initiates a campaign to increase the country's toilet coverage, and her husband gets a subsidized toilet constructed in their courtyard. But her father-in-law demolishes it and now Jaya flees again, this time filing for a divorce and initiating a campaign for toilet construction across village India. It is only when her husband's grandmother slips and falls on her way to the fields that her father-in-law acknowledges the benefits of having a home toilet. Their toilet is now reconstructed and Jaya returns to resume her conjugal life.

This film was inspired by the growing public attention to the shortage of toilets in India. By 2011, only 11.9 per cent of the population had access to toilets with sewer connectivity, whereas 3.2 per cent used public latrines and 49.8 per cent relieved themselves in the open (Census of India, 2011). Though flush toilets had long been the norm in middle-class urban pockets, they were hardly as common beyond them. Prior to around 2010 the public debate about sanitation had mainly been limited to dry toilets, given their requirement for manual scavenging of the kind that reproduces caste-based untouchability. But with the growing concern for the risk of teasing, ogling and rape faced by women without toilet access, the sanitation debate expanded. Beginning with the 'No toilet, no Bride' campaign initiated in 2007 (cf. Wax, 2009), stories about brides refusing to move in with toilet-less in-laws began to proliferate, and in 2014, the Government of India, spearheaded by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, resolved to make India open defecation-free (or 'ODF-free' according to governmental jargon) by October 2019 (Dashi, 2016) as part of its Swacch Bharat (clean India) campaign. Though largely a welcome campaign, there were also reports about shoddy construction, leaky pipes, maintenance problems and corruption that gave villagers little reason to stop 'going to the field', as the Indian expression has it. For Doron and Raja (2015), this is equally suggestive of a government imposing its modernist sense of sanitation onto a culturally resistant population. Yet close-up field studies among women leave little doubt about the hardship of lacking toilet privacy (see e.g. Nallari, 2015), which also begs the question of how female anthropologists adjust to such conditions.

These developments coincided with a period in which my own fieldwork in India began to involve excursions to rural destinations close to that depicted in the film. Here, in rural Uttar Pradesh, a whopping 77.1 per cent had no latrine access whatsoever (Census of India, 2011). This need not have been a problem provided that there were secluded places to go. But Uttar Pradesh happens to be one of India's flattest, driest and most densely populated states. With 200 million people crammed into a United Kingdom-sized space, needy women have few bushes or hillocks to hide behind, and even if they find one, they risk being spotted by

bicycling farmers or schoolboys. And since female modesty is of paramount importance here, being caught in the act is a dreadful disgrace. Only darkness provides the privacy required. Spending entire days in such areas I quickly realized that the most important research method I needed to master was bladder control. Recalling the readings I had done in social anthropology and South Asian studies in the preceding decades, I racked my brain for field reflections mentioning the challenges of fieldwork in densely populated, toilet-scarce areas or the coping strategies of female fieldworkers having to straddle the double meaning of 'going to the field'. But I could hardly think of a single one. This article aims to help fill this gap.

Drawing on the limited anthropological publications that deal with this topic, I want to make the following points. First, the archetypical 'toilet test' associated with fieldwork in far-away places comprises different but often simultaneous transitions, each of which merits separate reflection. Second, anthropologists experience unfamiliar sanitary conditions in ways that depend heavily on their gender, age and cultural conditioning. And third, to the extent that places with 'difficult' sanitary conditions attract fewer and differently positioned anthropologists than others, this results in thinner aggregate research, which in turn influences collective anthropological knowledge-production.

In making these points I write from a deeply personal experience based on the three main 'toilet tests' I have been exposed to in the course of my successive fieldworks in India over the past 22 years: the transition from paper to water, from sitting to squatting, and from privacy to varying degrees of publicness. Clearly, none of these would have come across as tests without a preference for paper, sitting and privacy. Yet even Western anthropologists experience these tests differently. What I suggest is that my background from a Norwegian family of nature lovers only a few generations removed from the rural outhouse made it easier to pass the two initial tests than if I had grown up in, say, London, Los Angeles or Amsterdam. My third test, in contrast, the lack of privacy, seemed so insurmountable that I immediately concluded that I had met my Waterloo, thus making me shelve my plan of expanding my fieldwork to what would have been a fascinating add-on field site. I am hardly alone in harbouring such reactions, and the least we can do is to defy our embarrassment and examine their anthropological implications.

Toilets in anthropological field reflections

In drawing attention to 'toilet tests' and their implications, I draw heavily on Sjaak van der Geest. In a thoughtful article titled 'Not knowing about defecation', he notes with puzzlement that the reflexive turn of the 1990s emboldened so few anthropologists to reflect on their encounters with the toilet facilities at their field sites. Though the gradual mastery of unfamiliar toilet conditions frequently find their way into *rite de passage*-related corridor conversations, instances in which anthropologists 'fail the toilet test' (2007: 79) by beginning to avoid certain

places or situations due to their miserable toilet conditions are generally concealed, he continues. Van der Geest begins with himself:

Thinking of the ‘horror’ of my own toilet experience on my first morning in the field in Kwahu, Ghana [...], I wonder how one can cut out such incidents from reflexive contemplation. [...] It suffices to note that it was not only the rebellion of four of my five senses (fortunately, taste was not involved), which made me run away from the filthy public toilet. The absence of privacy was equally decisive for my fear of the situation. Feeling the eyes of the squatting figures on me – though nobody looked at me directly – I found it impossible to squat between them, incapable to cope with the technical and social problem of handling my own dirt and the dirt around me. (Van der Geest, 2007: 79; for details, see Van der Geest, 1998)

This experience leads him to make a succinct point about fieldwork limitations:

Relating this incident to the rest of my fieldwork, as a reflexive anthropologist should do, I can see one major implication. My running away from that place and my subsequent almost continuous avoidance of local toilets has made me aware of a serious shortcoming in my participation in the daily life of the community. (Van der Geest, 2007: 79)

An unofficial email survey he conducted to find out whether any of his colleagues had similar stories to tell only yielded a single additional ‘toilet test’ failure. This was the experience of Irene Agyepon, a Ghanaian public health physician who admitted to having refrained from staying overnight in a fishing village because ‘defecation had to be done in the bush and the feces were immediately consumed by pigs’ (in Van der Geest, 2007: 80).

Former anthropological writings on sanitary conditions had mainly revolved around coping. Douglas Raybeck, for instance, describes how much he longed for a Western toilet with paper when he fell ill with dysentery during fieldwork in rural Malaysia and constantly had to rush home to his dark privy at the back of his field hut (1996: 40). Daniel Bradburd describes a situation in which he reached the loo too late because he did not consider pulling down his pants in the open despite being in the middle of the desert at three o’clock in the morning (1998: 61). On a more positive note, Ivo Strecker recalls that, while doing fieldwork among the Hamar people in Ethiopia, he and his wife found it ‘enchanting’ to relieve themselves ‘surrounded by plants, birds and insects’ (personal communication quoted in Van der Geest, 2007: 80). Tales of toilet conditions that became too difficult to handle were discreetly confined to the university corridors, to the extent they were spoken of at all.

Later developments in the discipline brought little change. If anything, the corridor talk about sanitation fell even more quiet due to the growing proportion of anthropologists studying topics that do *not* require fieldwork in rural locations. Consider the revision of Shirley Fedorak’s textbook *Anthropology Matters!* In the

first edition, the section on fieldwork challenges ends with the remark that ‘Many an anthropologist has had to make do with non-existent toilet facilities, and the opportunity to bathe, except in a nearby stream, may be remote’ (Fedorak, 2007: 9). This was not inaccurate: Twenty years earlier, a survey conducted by the American Anthropological Association had revealed that only 42 per cent of its members had access to flush toilets or chemical toilets during fieldwork, while 40 per cent made do with existing or self-dug latrines and about 20 per cent had nothing but woods, fields and streams (Howell, 1990: 56–7). As anthropologists gradually expanded their interest to urban conditions, Western societies, transnational phenomena and the digital world, a steadily declining proportion of anthropologists has had to deal with unfamiliar sanitary conditions of this kind. Thus when *Anthropology Matters* (now without the exclamation mark) was rewritten to make room for ‘four new chapters on language revitalization, social media and social revolutions, human migration, and the role of NGOs in international development practice’ (Fedorak, 2013: back cover), the gentle warning about sanitation was removed.

Since the topic of toilet tests began to fade from the anthropological horizon before it could be expanded, their gender dimension was hardly addressed even though it is a no-brainer to point out that toilet tests are more challenging for women than for men. While the horrors of male anthropologists are limited to defecation, their female colleagues are just as concerned with urination, which forces them into similar squats far more often. To begin bringing out the gender dimension I turn to William A. Callahan’s documentary *Toilet Adventures* (2014), where non-Chinese scholars talk about their first impressions of toilets in China. A sequence that crosscuts the experience of two female scholars – Wannapa from Thailand and Miriam from the US – is particularly illustrative, here in Callahan’s own, lightly abbreviated transcription:

Wannapa: I would like to go to the toilet, we have to go to the public toilet. I don’t know how to do, and I don’t know. . .

Miriam: I went to the bathroom. There were cubicle-like stalls, back to back to back down the middle. They were all squat toilets –

W: – with very, very low walls, low walls. But no door –

M: – the barriers between these cubicles came about breast high. So you could stare down the entire row of ladies squatting at the toilets.

W: And then I saw something dirty, smelly –

M: – the stench of the place, as is normal, was outrageous. The cleanliness, we won’t even speak of that.

W: – so I have to walk and look, look, look and go into the last one, the last one.

M: I squatted down to do my business and I had this very particular feeling. It was as if I was not alone.

W: I tried to do something, but I could not even sit down, because I saw so many accumulated faeces, faeces. As well as I saw the maggots, a lot of maggots. . .

M: I sort of look up, and I am surrounded. There is an entire group of Chinese ladies who are peering down to see if my butt is as white as my face is.

W: – so I just walk away, and told my professor that I can't do it. (Laughter) I couldn't do it.

M: – and I eventually get out of there as quick as I can, not only because of the stink but because the observation was intense.

W: (Sigh) (Callahan, 2015)

As the transcript suggests, female scholars experience the same discomfort with hygiene and privacy as male anthropologists have reported, only far more often. A detail omitted in this transcript is that Miriam 'wobbled' while squatting, which suggests the additional problem some people may have of adjusting to squat toilets. In the pages that follow, I continue where Van der Geest and Callahan left off by detailing the three toilet tests that I have been exposed to over the years, emphasizing the importance of gender, age and cultural conditioning for their fallout.

Water

Having obtained my education prior to the corporatization of the university sector, I seem to belong to the last generation of anthropologists who have been able to do long-term fieldwork in faraway places several times without relinquishing participant observation. If my field hosts peeled peas, I peeled with them. If the temple-goers I studied sang devotional songs, I did my best to sing along. And if my field acquaintances used water instead of toilet paper, I used water too. Switching from paper to water was never a problem. Admittedly, the first times I had to convince myself that what I was about to do would be little worse than changing nappies on a baby. The only add-on would be to distinguish between left- and right-hand activities forever after, which those I lived among learned as toddlers. Gradually this became so deeply ingrained that it began to feel icky to return to paper at the end of my field visits. A few additional years down the road I became a routinized code switcher of the kind I assume most diaspora South Asians to be as part of their second nature, and since then I have hardly given the matter a thought.

To understand why the transition to water nevertheless was a toilet test of sorts, I need to unpack a few details about the sanitary facilities I grew up with in Norway. In this part of the world, there has never been a tradition for wiping one's bottom with water. One reason is the climate. In a country where the temperature frequently is below the freezing point from November to April and rarely exceeds 25°C (77°F) even in the mid-summer, the water would simply be uncomfortably cold. As a result, many a foreign traveller has reacted to Northerners with disgust. Consider how Syed Ahmad Ibn Fadlan from Baghdad described the Viking traders he met at the banks of the Volga in 921:

They are the filthiest of all Allah's creatures: they do not purify themselves after excreting or urinating or wash themselves when in a state of ritual impurity after

coitus and do not even wash their hands after food. Indeed they are like the asses which err. (quoted in Hraundal, 2013: 100)

If this quote seems dated, let me assure you that little had changed by the 1860s, when Norway's pioneering sociologist Eilert Sundt reported that the majority of the population only cleaned themselves if they needed to dress up for something. Except for the white-collar elite, the majority only bathed on Saturday in order to look decent in Church on Sunday (Sundt, 1975: 290–8). This habit is even reflected in the language: the Norwegian name for Saturday – *lørdag* – is a derivation of the old Norse word *laugardagr*, which means 'bathing day'.

Another reason why Norwegians did not use water is that flush toilets were late in coming and that water would have sabotaged the dry toilets that preceded them. Whereas flush toilets were rapidly installed in cities such as London, Paris and New York following the breakthrough verification in 1883 that cholera was caused by germ-infested water rather than 'bad air' (Horan, 1997: 78), this option seemed impossible in Norway at the time. Not only did the cold climate entail a soaring risk of frozen water pipes and concomitant leakage. Most of the population was too scattered for sewer connectivity, and the largest cities – Oslo and Bergen – were, moreover, believed to be too hilly for a sewer system to function properly. Even when the decision to initiate a large-scale transition to flush toilets was eventually made in 1910 (Torstenson, 1997: 93–5), the development was so slow and patchy that I hardly know a single Norwegian of my own generation (born in the 1960s) without ample exposure to dry toilets. While these came in many different shapes, from the rural outhouse (*utedo*) to the *klaskedo* (named after its *klask* or splat sounds) of multi-story apartment buildings, their common denominator is that the use of water would have worsened the task of emptying them and increased the risk of leakage. The drier the waste, the more easily it could be dug out, transferred to a horse carriage and mixed with calcium and turf to produce fertilizer, a system that was in use well into the 1970s even in the capital (cf. Johnsen and Torstenson, 1992; Torstenson, 1997).

What did people use instead of water? Usually not toilet paper, which despite having been around since 1857 (Horan, 1997: 143) was seen as a lavish expenditure until it was necessitated by flush toilets. Instead Norwegians used newspaper scraps, old telephone directories, mail-order catalogues and, before the era of surplus paper, moss, leaves, wooden sticks, or even a finger (Berg and Ottosen, 1988: 25–9). My parents, who grew up in the 1940s and 1950s, still remember using newspaper scraps when visiting relatives with outhouses and friends with *klaskedo*, rubbing the scraps between their hands to soften them. Toilet paper was only catapulted into a necessity with the flush toilet, which required easily dissolvable paper to prevent drain blockage. Well until the 1970s my friends and I were scolded if we used too much of it. One wipe will do (*ett tork er nok*), we were told, a common expression reinvented in the 2000s to limit the use of hand-wiping paper for environmental reasons. And when we were hiking in the wilderness and

had forgot to bring paper along, we were taught to fall back upon the age-old practice of using leaves, moss, or grass.

There is thus little doubt that my fieldwork transition to water was a toilet test of sorts. But fortunately it was not too challenging due to my exposure to a variety of non-paper solutions. If water became a problem, it was because it was too cold or too scarce. One winter fieldwork was particularly challenging. A research project on the middle-class Hindu appropriation of Western New Age discourses in 2003–5 had brought me to a residential religious centre (*ashram*) in the outskirts of the pilgrim town of Haridwar. During the winter months, low-hanging clouds of cold fog drifted from the uninhabited forest at the other side of the river across to my ashram block. Though my room was equipped with a bathroom with water-heater (or *geyser*, as locals say), I followed the practice of switching it off immediately after my morning bath to keep the electricity bill down. The rest of the day it was off, and between 8am and noon there was usually no electric power anyway, given the load shedding practised by the state-owned power supplier. Despite coming from one of the coldest countries in the world, this was my coldest winter ever. The temperature frequently crept down to 4°C (39°F), and since my room had no heating, uninsulated walls, unclosable windows, and scarce electricity supply, it was not much warmer inside. So what about going to the loo, using water? Man, it was *sooo freeezing cold!* I delayed each visit for as long as I could. Had I only been able to minimize my intake of liquid, but hot tea was all I had to keep myself warm and reduce the stiffness of my fingers, which I needed to keep sufficiently soft to type fieldnotes. *Ohohoho so cold!* Eventually I formed a habit of closing my eyes, holding my breath, and counting to three to brace myself for the freezing gush of water that concluded every bathroom visit. But I managed, though I often wished I were a man who did not have to suffer through this quite as often.

Fields sites with scarce water supply were worse. Consider the low-class housing complex in which I lived for some months during my virgin fieldwork in 1992–3. This was in the city of Kanpur, where I had come to study middle-class upper-caste Hindu articulations of Hindu nationalism. But due to the Hindu-Muslim riots that followed the demolition of the Babar mosque in Ayodhya in December 1992, I had to move to a different part of town for some months (for details, see Frøystad, 2005). Here I eventually found a tiny one-room home whose only luxuries were a naked light bulb and a ceiling fan. This was one of ten similar homes surrounding a cobble-stoned courtyard with a broken water pump. Water was only available through a ‘government pipe’ (*sarkari nal* in Hindi) open from 6 to 7am. I had two buckets to fill; neighbours with many children had between four and six – and the water we collected had to cover everything from drinking water to personal hygiene, house cleaning, laundry, and toilet flushing. The complex had three lavatories at the entrance, which were shared by the 40 to 50 inhabitants. These were primarily used for defecation. As for urination, men and boys used the open sewer that separated the house from the street, while women and girls used the external bathing sections attached to each family room except mine. All I had in my room

was a kitchen drain, so I preferred the lavatories. These were proper porcelain toilets connected to sewage, but without water cisterns. Flush water would thus have to be carried into the booths. Fortunately my next-door neighbours let me share the old paint bucket they used for this purpose on the condition that I contributed to fill it. Usually this worked well. But when there was too little water left, or if a toilet or two got clogged, there would be flies, stench, and worse, just like the dry toilets that Vinay Kumar Srivastava (2014) so vividly describes from his childhood in Old Delhi. If someone had diarrhoea or missed the hole in the darkness of a power cut, the result could be awful. What was worse was that nobody cleaned it up and that nobody would let me do so either. This was the work of the female sweeper (*jamadarin*), I was sternly told, and waiting eagerly for her biweekly visit thus became my first hands-on experience with untouchability. And she could not be hurried; she had other responsibilities too. For the first time in my life, I truly wished I were a man, especially when menstruating. Ever since then, I have never left for fieldwork without paper, soap and anti-disinfectant, which I consider indispensable for anyone working in regions as prone to heat, poor sanitation, and stomach upsets as the poor pockets of Uttar Pradesh. Though not even these remedies provided waterproof protection against stomach upsets, they certainly facilitated the transition from paper to water. But this transition rarely came alone. It usually went hand-in-hand with the transition from sitting to squatting, which I here treat as my second toilet test.

Squatting

In Callahan's film about adjusting to Chinese toilets, this is what Miriam said: 'As I sat there wobbling, because my squat muscles are not the best...'. Squat toilets can be challenging for people with weak quadriceps and reduced joint flexibility. People accustomed to chair-like toilets may not have developed the muscles required, and the question of flexibility adds a pronounced age dimension to the question of adaptability.

Let me begin with cultural conditioning. Though it is largely true that squat toilets primarily are prevalent in Asia, they were also fairly common in Southern Europe until a few decades ago, and are still found in France. The adaptability of Western anthropologists to Asian squat toilets is thus likely to depend on their country of origin. It is probably no coincidence that Miriam was an American, coming from a country where squat toilets hardly exist, and presumably also living in a city with limited possibilities for nature walks with 'enchanted' (as Strecker put it) pee breaks.

For me the situation was different. Not only had I spent four years of my childhood in Spain, with sporadic exposure to squat toilets. My remaining upbringing in Norway had contained innumerable nature walks with occasional pee squats behind bushes and trees. Given its topography, forests and hills are always close by in this country. Even from my present downtown apartment in the capital, it only takes a 20-minute subway ride to reach the Nordmarka forest,

where one can walk for days without encountering a single house or motorized vehicle. As Nina Witozek (1998) correctly remarks, Norwegians identify so strongly with their natural surroundings that fjords, mountains, and forests have come to constitute a foundational myth of Norwegianness. Indeed, my father came so close to embodying this myth that I grew up treating the hilly forest as a source of patriotism, divinity, and fitness in one. Consequently enchanting squat stops behind bushes and trees had been part of my life for as long as I can remember, and so had the long-term squats required for picking blueberries and cloudbberries every August. The transition to Asian toilets was thus far easier for me than for Miriam in Callahan's documentary. Indeed, given the choice between an 'Indian' and a 'Western' toilet, to follow the dichotomy of Indian railways, I would always choose the former, especially in public places. That said, there have also been situations when squatting was physically challenging. The first I will recount sustains the focus on gender but in a way that transcends physical differences.

Until the 1992 riots began, my initial fieldwork was a comfortable one in terms of sanitary facilities. For several months I stayed with a Brahman joint family as their temporary 15th member. Here I had access to several squat toilets with flush facilities, two of which were sparkling new. Yet living with a conservative Brahman family was also fairly restrictive for a young woman, which I was at the time. This was in the early 1990s, when women of 'good' families would damage their reputation if they moved too much about in public without male guardians. *Samaj kya kahega* (what will society say?) was the expression used to keep young women like me indoors. Consequently my Norwegian body, which was accustomed to regular hiking, bicycling, and walking, suddenly became a far more sedentary body. Neither was there any suitable place for morning walks nearby, nor could I compensate with household work since the family insisted that this was the task of servants (cf. Frøystad, 2003). Postural yoga could of course have been an option, had I only known it at the time. Gradually the sedentary lifestyle manifested itself in severe lower back pain. One day I could not bend, hardly sit, and only walk in a stiff, Monty Pythonesque fashion. What about using the squat toilets? Suffice it to say that it would have been much easier to be a man, a thought that immediately prompts the reflection that, if I *had* been a man, I would hardly have been in this pitiful position in the first place. Fortunately I soon had an osteopath at my bedside who helped me recover and continue my fieldwork.

The second squat challenge that deserves mention derives from a more recent field visit in 2015. By this time the age dimension had begun to make itself felt. Close to my 50th year, I had now developed problems with my knees. Despite frequent trekking in Norwegian forests as well as in the Pyrenees, and despite going regularly to the gym and cycling to work, the strength in my right knee dwindled so fast that, one day, I found myself unable to walk from my home to the bus stop two blocks away. A few X-rays and MRI scans later I was diagnosed with degenerative arthritis. On top of the sorrow over all the activities I would now have to reduce, I also worried about fieldwork: How would I now finalize my new research project on ritual engagement across official religious boundaries, which

I had started only one year earlier? Aside from the practicalities of travelling back and forth to India, my new field site was a working-class neighbourhood in which all my informants used squat toilets. How does one resume fieldwork in such a place with knees as uncooperative as mine? Fortunately a physiotherapist provided a tailor-made exercise programme that I supplemented with additional knee bends and a short *titaliasana* (butterfly pose) sequence to prepare myself for the squat toilets and cross-legged conversations that awaited me. In this way everything has fortunately gone well since then, though I still fear the day I will be unable to get up from the squat position I normally enter seven to eight times a day as a consequence of my gender and choice of field site. Whenever that happens, I will have to change topic and field site altogether. I could of course begin to ‘study up’ (in the sense of Nader, 1972), go digital, switch to the kind of topics addressed in the last edition of Fedorak’s anthropology textbook, or even spend the remains of my career as an armchair anthropologist. But the more scholars who follow such priorities, the less research will be produced from congested societies without Western sanitary comforts.

I was of course not alone in having knee problems. Virtually all my field acquaintances have older relatives with graver problems than mine, and some were even aging themselves. One told me how his arthritic father had become unable to visit relatives, friends, and others without ascertaining himself that there was a ‘Western’ toilet in the house. Another told me of his mistake of defying his diarrhoea in order to go for a morning walk. Having stopped to defecate at the edge of a potato field, his arthritic knees made it impossible for him to get up again without using his arms, whereupon he slipped and soiled himself with no ability to wash until he reached home. The only solution for families without Western toilets at home would be to invest in a portable toilet or resort to the bricolage-style solution (in the classic sense of Lévi-Strauss, 1966) of placing a seat-less chair over a squat toilet or pit. In theory, visiting anthropologists could easily follow suit, but this would hardly solve the problem for those of us who pursue person-centred methods requiring lengthy walkabouts and excursions with our field acquaintances, and certainly not for the women of us.

It was during such an excursion I encountered my third toilet test, which besides involving the act of ‘going to the field’ in the Indian sense, bought me face-to-face with the challenge of peeing in public – at least as I had been brought up to conceptualize the public/private distinction in such a situation.

Lack of privacy

In 2015 I brought two filmmakers along to the field. Generous funding from the Research Council of Norway had enabled me to make an ethnographic film based on my research on ritual engagement across official religious boundaries.¹ One day one of the filmmakers, Dipesh Kharel, and I accompanied a Brahman Hindu priest on a full-day excursion to a medieval Sufi shrine (*dargah*) he occasionally frequented. The *dargah* was located in a village two hours from our base in the

outskirts of Kanpur, and on the way we stopped by the home village of the priest's in-laws. When we arrived, we had already been on the road for four to five hours since we had stopped at numerous temples and tea shops along the way. Knowing the toilet shortage of this area, I had drunk next to nothing. Having reached the in-laws' house, Dipesh and I were seated in the outer room and served first water and sweets, then tea and biscuits, as behoves guests from far-away lands. Shortly afterwards Dipesh was invited for a walk with the menfolk to have a look at the village and its agricultural fields (which also offered opportunities for peeing, as Dipesh later revealed), leaving me behind with the women of our host family and a semi-disabled male neighbour. Shortly afterwards one of the women discreetly approached me and whisperingly asked whether I 'needed to go' (*aapko jana hai?*), adding that there was 'nobody there' (*koi nahi hai*) right now. Following the principle of 'when you see a toilet, use it', I accompanied her inside. Here I suddenly found myself in a small courtyard with a water pump in the middle. Five or six women kept crisscrossing the courtyard preparing additional hospitality for me and the other visitors. In the water pump? With all these women fussing about, none of whom I knew? No way. Evidently the whispering statement that it was nobody there meant that no *men* would be present, and that the women of the house were accustomed to peeing with other women around. Clearly the water pump doubled as a ladies' urinal protecting the upper-caste women of the house – who had even more to lose in terms of respectability than women from lower castes – from having to go outdoors in broad daylight. Even though I recognized the rural counterpart of the bathing sections of my 1993 fieldwork, I just couldn't. Like Wannapa in Callahan's documentary, I could not do it. For the first time during my 22 years of shuttling back and forth to India, I was overpowered by a profound sense of having encountered an insurmountable obstacle. I had met my Waterloo. Once I regained my thinking capacity, I began to reflect on the notion of privacy that had structured my reaction.

In my part of the world, going to the loo is generally a deeply private activity nowadays. The use of the words *privet* and *privy* for outhouses and loos is etymologically rooted in privacy, which in this context denotes an activity one does all alone. The only exception is male urination, which most men are accustomed to doing side by side – at least in public urinals. True, certain bars are equipped with companion toilets in which young women can exchange intimate news while peeing, but they would hardly feel comfortable entering such cubicles with others than close friends. And though many a rural outhouse was equipped with two holes side by side, going to the loo was hardly something one did with strangers.² The preference for company is rooted in the long, dark and cold Norwegian nights, often combined with fear of ghosts, trolls and other scary beings. With the transition to indoor toilets, the preference for company disappeared.

Indian women without toilet access have more tangible fears. Besides the risks of being spotted, teased, or even raped, rural women who go to the fields must always be on the lookout for dangerous snakes and scorpions. Additionally, there is the risk of being possessed by ghosts and spirits, which are believed to hover

about precisely in the village peripheries that offer seclusion for the needy. Given their 'open' bodies (cf. Lamb, 2000), women of fertile age are more susceptible to possession than others, particularly when menstruating. Women thus have to take great care about the timing and location for their trips to the field, and the darkness that protects them from male ogling is not necessarily optimal for other risks. In short, it would be foolish for rural women to go alone.

To exemplify how comfortable Indian women can be while peeing in the company of others, I continue with an event that occurred a few weeks later. At the end of my stay I made a day-trip to the city of Lucknow with a long-time friend to visit the Bara Imambara, an architectural marvel I had not had the pleasure of seeing for over a decade. Due to road repairs and metro construction along the way, we spent three hours to reach it. Once inside the Imambara gate I spotted a public toilet, and following the principle of 'when you see a toilet, etc.', I decided to give it a try. But the path to the women's section was blocked by a group of young women. When I asked whether they were in line, they said they were not. This was when I noticed the woman squatting in the middle of the group. She was urinating right outside the toilet doors, and her friends were shielding her. When I asked why she did not use one of the cubicles, the squatting one responded that they were so dirty (*gande*) that it was better to do it outside – which she did while chatting with her friends and now me. Spotting my bewildered face, they immediately asked whether I needed to go as well, in which case they would be happy to let me into the circle. Once again I felt the pang of inconceivability that struck me so forcefully during the village excursion a few weeks earlier. Once again I responded with a meek 'no thanks, it is not that necessary' (*ji nahin, itni zaruri to nahi hai*). And once again I withdrew, in gratitude for my habit of drinking as little as possible during excursions coupled with a mild frustration over my gender and the restrictions it posed, mixed with relief for being in the city this time, where I could easily pay my way to a restaurant restroom if necessary.

Strangely, no research on toilet coverage in India that I have come across mentions the importance of clothing. Yet clothing is of paramount importance to women's ability to move around in toilet-free zones without compromising their respectability more than necessary. Imagine becoming needy in an area with people all around but with no toilet in sight. Even if you find a tree, house, or car to squat behind, solitude is never guaranteed. What would be the ideal thing to wear in such a situation? Until recently, the obvious choice would be a *sari* with no undergarments, in which case all one needs to do is to lift the sari half-way and squat. The Brahman grandmother who generously shared her bed with me during my PhD follow-up fieldwork on everyday Hindu nationalism in 1997 told me that, until 10 years earlier, she never used underwear underneath her sari, and on several occasions I have seen poor sari-clad women peeing in the streets by lifting a leg and letting go. Another option is the long shirt and baggy pants known as *salwar-kurta*. Though one must lift the kurta in order to untie the cotton string that holds the salwar in place, kurtas still provide sufficient backside cover for a trained squatter. An additional advantage is that both saris and salwar-kurtas enable veiling, which

makes it possible to cover one's face in the event that one is caught in the act, as shown in the *Toilet: A Love Story* film. The least desirable option is clearly jeans with short tops, partly because jeans are too thick and tight for comfortable squatting but primarily because short tops give less cover to an exposed bottom. Could this be what Miriam of the *Toilet Adventures* documentary was wearing in China that day? She does not say, but what seems clear is that female fieldworkers moving around in toilet-free zones would do well to follow the local habit of dressing in ways that minimize exposure and practise how to cover up while squatting, as Hanssen (2018) came to master while living among Bengali Bauls. For me the solution was salwar-kurtas, but even then certain field sites were simply too challenging.

Following our visit to the house where I refrained from using the water pump, the priest, Dipesh and I proceeded to the Sufi shrine (*dargah*) that was our main destination. The *dargah* was located in a village another hour into the interior. I had been there a few times before and taken great interest in the place. Not only did it attract people of diverse religious backgrounds due to the healing, wish-granting, and blessings one could obtain here; it also had a Lingeswar (Shiva) temple next door and an annual festival that attracted far-away Hindu and Muslim mystics alike – including my priest acquaintance given his side profession as a Tantric ritual expert. For a research project on fluid religious practices, this venue would be a promising extension of my ongoing work in Kanpur, I thought. One year earlier I had thus asked the resident *pir* (seer) for permission to come and stay for a week or so, bringing my own bedding and food. The *pir* generously responded that I was more than welcome, but warned me that there was no toilet. Back then I interpreted this statement to mean that there were no amenities suitable for a woman presumably accustomed to 'Western' toilets and advertisement-like cleanliness. But when I repeated the question during my 2015 fieldwork with Dipesh and got the same response, my heart sank. Even though I later learned that there was indeed a dark and dirty lavatory in a secluded corner of the premises – almost too dark to even manage 'number 1', as Dipesh expressed it later (personal communication, 2016) – the custodian evidently considered this place so unfit for me that he did not even want me to know about it. Given the *dargah*'s location in a small, impoverished village with no public amenities, there was hardly an alternative to going to the fields.

Except one. At the end of this visit I finally came to know what the only alternative would have been. It was now around 6pm and the priest, Dipesh and I had been on the road the entire day. At this point the *pir*'s wife (with whom he did not live since his spiritual duties required celibacy), who had served us food and beverages when we arrived, reappeared and whisperingly asked whether I would like to see her house and meet her son and daughter. I nodded, and off we went along the unpaved lane that traversed the village until we reached their house at the other end. Correctly assuming my bladder to be filling up after a long day on the road, she escorted me into a tiny bathroom containing a water tap and a full water drum but no lavatory. Yet the floor was connected to a drain, so evidently

this was a bathing section doubling as a female urinal, just like the bathing sections of my 1992–3 fieldwork and the water pump in the village we visited on the way. In order to spend a week in this dargah I would thus have to negotiate full-day access to the custodian's private home. As for 'number 2', as Dipesh termed it, I would either have to use the fields or gamble on the existence of a dry lavatory in the same house, one they also did not want me to know about. In hindsight I realize that the *pir* may well have quoted the lack of toilets as a gentle way to restrict my female, un-Islamic and foreign presence in his shrine even though he frequently asks the Brahman priest when I will return. In any case, the door to this fascinating supplementary field site closed almost as soon as it had opened. At the same time, I also got first-hand experience of a problem faced by millions of Indian women every day: that their greater need for toilet privacy goes hand-in-hand with a more restricted access.

Could I have got used to relieving myself in front of other women? At the time I did not find it as abhorrent as physically inconceivable. Recall Wannapa again: 'I couldn't do it'. I could simply not imagine myself being physically able to let go under such conditions. Yet if Dentan could learn to defecate side by side with his Semai informants in Malaysia, I could surely have learned to squat in-between female strangers if I had to. After all, we are speaking of an irrepressible biological need, and we know from total institutions such as war trenches and concentration camps that people do manage when no other options are available. Yet there and then it felt irrevocably clear that I had reached the limit beyond which I was unable to tread. I was defeated by my third and hopefully final toilet test.

Concluding reflections

Over the years that I have heard male colleagues complaining about diarrhoea and stinky squat toilets, I have often felt numb. To be sure, it was easy to retaliate with stories about dysentery and Delhi bellies. But such periods were hardly the worst, and moreover they were always passing. The struggle I was unable to articulate without being side-lined by masculine diarrhoea pertained to the shortage of toilets when moving around, which I solved by limited water intake and modest clothing until I could no longer avoid the lack of privacy that eventually became my defeat. I would probably never have put this experience in writing had it not coincided with the rising public concern in India for how sanitary conditions affect women and schoolgirls. Using this debate to illuminate how sanitary conditions may affect field-working anthropologists, I have argued that there is not merely 'one' toilet test but several, the difficulties of which depend on gender, age and cultural conditioning. In my case I had few problems shifting to water and squatting. Yet as a woman accustomed to privacy, I had serious problems with answering the call of nature amidst strangers, and as my age creeps up, it is only a matter of time until I develop problems with squatting. As Van der Geest argues, such matters are hardly without implications, which – I would add – go beyond the work of the individual scholar.

To begin scaling up, consider the anthropology of rural Uttar Pradesh. Though my library contains excellent monographs from this region, it is hardly a coincidence that a vast majority of their authors, whether male or female, resided with the local schoolteacher, government official, dominant caste family or NGO representative, in which case they presumably had access to a privy. Many of these monographs craft excellent portraits of less well-to-do villagers. Yet it is beyond doubt that poor and toilet-less population segments are primarily studied by means of interviews, surveys and statistics whereas better-off sections attract the main proportion of participant observation of the kind that enables Geertzian thick description. This pattern seems particularly clear in the case of India-based scholars. Over the years I have heard many of them state their inability to spend the night in places without basic amenities, a statement hardly made with the embarrassment of defeat. Scaled even further up, we may ask what implications such patterns may have for collective knowledge production. All matters being equal, field sites with difficult sanitary conditions are likely to attract fewer female and senior anthropologists than other field sites, which in turn will influence the kind of topics that are addressed. Equally serious are the additional factors that presently discourage anthropologists from fieldwork in challenging places. On top of the aforementioned expansion of the discipline, these include how the cut-throat competition for jobs and the push for external funding privilege fieldwork requiring shorter investment of time and an easily recognizable 'relevance' in the eyes of our funding agencies. Though simple conditions undoubtedly will continue to hold attraction for some, I occasionally fear that these developments will turn the societies in which anthropologists once specialized into new white spots on the ethnographic map.

Future generations of anthropologists will probably be even more reliant upon modern comforts than mine has been. To prepare new generations for fieldwork under challenging conditions, the easiest way out would of course be to advise them to familiarize themselves with the conditions in the field and practise pushing their own limits. Yet to leave such issues to first-time fieldworkers to figure out individually would arguably be as irresponsible as our predecessors' tendency to teach their PhD students methodology by telling them to sink or swim. Now that postmodern reflection has been supplemented by a heightened attention to materiality, the least we can do is to thematize the infrastructural underpinnings of our own knowledge-production in the field, not just individually but also as an academic collective.

So did I ever 'go to the field' in the Indian sense? Sure. And did I ever experience the fear of assault while doing so? Only sort of. During an earlier excursion with the Brahman priest from the previous section, he suddenly turned around to ask why I have no biological children (though my life partner has two from an earlier marriage). We were on his motorbike; I was at the back. I told him. 'So would you like one?' he asked. I responded that, close to 49, it would be too late even if I wanted to. Well, he said, he happened to know a tantric ritual that worked almost every time as long as it was done in secrecy in a secluded place after sunset.

The time was just right, and so was the place we were approaching, a dense shrub in-between two villages where he occasionally helped childless female clients to conceive. ‘They have to light a small oil lamp, open their petticoat and . . . would you like to try?’ I shook my head. My heart was pounding. I wanted to get off, but he was driving too fast. ‘Are you sure?’ The priest then flashed his betel-stained teeth in a hearty laugh and said that he would show me the spot anyway, as it also happened to be suitable for a pee stop. After all, we had been on the road the entire day, and did I not have to go equally urgently (*tez se*) as him? He turned off the highway and entered a dirt road. Then a narrower dirt road. And finally a small, dusty path. My heart was still pounding. ‘Enough’ (*bas*), he declared. ‘I’ll go this way (he pointed); you’ll go that way (pointing in the opposite direction)’. And so we did, which made me spend the rest of the trip in gratitude for having found such a gentlemanly interlocutor. That both the priest and I spent the rest of the night picking out sticky, spiky seeds from our clothes, which almost gave rise to a different kind of rumour, is another story.

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Notes

1. *A Kali Temple Inside Out* (2018), made by Dipesh Kharel and Frode Storaas.
2. I make a possible exception for the multi-seat outhouses of large farms serving as overnight lodges for travellers. My mother claims that, in the late 1940s or early 1950s, she once visited a farm lodge with an 11-hole outhouse.

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