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## India Spaced Out

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The Mars Orbiter Mission (MOM) makes India one of four (the US, the EU and Russia being the other three) that have ventured to our closest planetary neighbour. Nationalism drive such escapades, not the quest for knowledge and understanding. The space race between the US and the Soviet Union for example, was not undertaken for the sake of knowledge.

A third of the world's poor – that's almost 1 billion people – are in India. And despite twenty years of so-called development, the World Bank (WB) records that not only has this number not reduced, but, “the absolute number of poor people in some of India's poorest states actually increased during the last decade.” These marginalized men women and children, live in rural India and, driven from their land by the commercialization of the countryside, the slums of the cities. In Mumbai alone – a city with a population of almost 21 millions – two-thirds live in rambling slums.

It is estimated that as many as 68% of people (or 885 millions) in India are living on less than US \$2 (the ‘official’ World Bank poverty line) a day, over half of whom are persisting on an income of under US \$1 a day (WB). Surviving on such a pittance is virtually impossible: parents cannot feed their children or themselves every day, or pay for health care or education; families live in suffocating conditions, a family of five, six, seven perhaps sleeping on the ground in one small room, which functions as kitchen, bedroom and living room. The majority of the population – over 50% – do not have the luxury of a toilet, and are forced to defecate in public. In a recent report on worldwide sanitation, The World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF found that, “globally, India continues to be the country with the highest number of people (597 million people) practicing open defecation.”

While hundreds of millions in the sub-continent live impoverished, degrading lives, the Indian government is investing the nation's income in sending a rocket to Mars at a cost of \$78 million, part of a space program that drains \$1 billion a year from the national budget. The Economist asks: “how can a country that cannot feed all of its people find the money for a Mars mission? (or the \$32 billions on defense each year, making India the world's biggest arms importer with the fourth largest air force.) Perhaps some of the 16,000 scientists and engineers working on the space program could be employed to design and install a nationwide sanitation system. The Indian government spends a mere 1.2% of GDP on public health, which as The Economist says, is “dismally low” (Afghanistan for example spends 8.7%, the Democratic Republic of Congo 5.6%). The needs and indeed rights of the Adivasi (indigenous) and Dalit (previously referred to as ‘the untouchables’) groups, are consistently abused and ignored. The truth is that the ruling elite care not for those living in abject destitution, they are an embarrassment to the Delhi/Mumbai set, the billionaires (India has 66 of the world's richest).

[Taken from an article by Graham Peebles here](#)