

## EASE OF LIVING INDEX IS WELCOME BUT FLAWED

Relevant for: Indian Society | Topic: Urbanization, their problems and their remedies incl. Migration & Smart Cities

The ministry of housing and urban affairs has launched its Ease of Living Index ranking 111 Indian cities inhabited by more than 130 million people. The exercise itself is a welcome admission of the fact that India's urbanisation process might have unleashed its own set of problems. There is nothing wrong in encouraging healthy competition among agencies which manage our cities. If such rankings can encourage broader citizen participation it will be even better. But any such exercise also needs to be evaluated in a macro framework.

Two factors have triggered India's urbanisation in addition to the normal demographic drivers: rural to urban migration as people seek non-farm jobs, and large scale movement from smaller to bigger cities in search of better opportunities. The first has primarily increased the number of people who live in abysmal conditions and earn their living in informal low income jobs such as construction and household work. The latter is best described by the IT boom which has virtually created new cities such as Gurugram or completely changed older ones such as Bengaluru, Hyderabad and Pune.

With burgeoning urban population, existing urban infrastructure, both institutional and physical, is being tested. From demands of reservations for locals in educational institutes and hospitals, to permanent damage to eco-systems, drainage networks and water-tables, side effects of poorly thought out and badly regulated urbanisation are beginning to show.

It on these macro questions that the new index disappoints. How far can releasing annual city-wise rankings on ease of living take us in dealing with such long-term challenges? Should we be judging cities by the same yardstick? For example, the index uses increase in issuance of construction permits to rank cities on economy and employment. More construction might be good news for Amravati, but is it desirable for a city like Old Delhi?

And last but not the least, the index also shows that the state continues to (wrongly) believe that it knows more about our economy and society than we do. How else does one explain the fact that Delhi is ranked at the 109th place among 111 cities on the economic sub-index?

First Published: Aug 14, 2018 18:46 IST

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