

# A WEAK TEST: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON SWACHH RANKING OF CITIES

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

The NDA government's Swachh Survekshan, the ranking system for clean cities, was rolled out four years ago as the answer to a problem that municipal law failed to solve. Sanitation and public health are responsibilities of State governments, and it is no secret that they have spectacularly failed at managing growing volumes of municipal and hazardous waste. The problem has only been compounded by the absence of plans that take a holistic view of housing, sanitation, water supply, waste management and transport. Ahead of the launch of [Swachh Survekshan 2020](#), the Union Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs is once again trying to stir up competition among cities, by pre-ranking them for their performance during 2019 and assigning points to be added this year. As an idea, unleashing the competitive spirit among States may seem appealing, but in reality, the problems confronting urban India require large-scale infrastructure creation, full adherence to legal requirements on waste management, and transparent technical audits. Many cities remain clueless on handling their waste, one shocking example being the rising mountain of garbage at the [Ghazipur landfill in Delhi](#). Ironically, Bhopal, which figures among the top five cleanest cities under the just-released list, continues to live with the effects of the gas disaster of 1984. Ranks and prizes clearly cannot solve the national waste management crisis.

Looking ahead to the next edition of the Survekshan, the Urban Affairs Ministry has identified ambitious targets: "100% processing and safe disposal of waste, complete faecal sludge and septage management, and wastewater treatment and reuse." These are major tasks. The Ministry has also sanctioned funds under the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) to help States set up facilities necessary to manage waste. States should ask for extended funding under such schemes to create the infrastructure for a future-focused clean-up and, simultaneously, institute measures to reduce waste. The emphasis worldwide is on creating a circular economy centred at the principle of material recovery from all kinds of waste, reuse, recycling and reduced pressure on natural resources. A sound ranking of cities and towns would naturally give the highest weightage to this dimension of sustainable management, replacing symbolism with an environmentally sound approach. Such rigour in policy formulation can make the Centre's goal of eliminating single-use plastic by 2022 seem more realistic, and industry would find a compelling reason to switch to alternatives. Retooling Swachh Survekshan 2020 to go beyond perception management and adopt sustainability is essential to make it a genuine contest.

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