SIFTING THE PILE: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON INEQUITY AND SWACHH CITIES

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

In what is turning out to be a predictable sequence in the annual 'Swachh Survekshan' awards, Indore was ranked the cleanest city for the fifth year, followed by Surat and Vijayawada. Chhattisgarh was the cleanest State, for the third time, in the category of 'States with more than 100 urban local bodies'. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's constituency, Varanasi, won for the cleanest 'Ganga city'. The organiser, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, surveyed 4,320 cities for nearly a month and solicited feedback from 4.2 crore people. The metrics (cities) were garbage disposal, open defecation-free ratings, functionality and maintenance of community toilets and safe management of faecal sludge. The 'Survekshan' awards have a wide range of categories that segregates cities based on their population. While they attempt to capture the diversity of urban agglomerations on the other, it is hard to deflect criticism: every State has at least a few participants who will top one category or the other, thus making the process a giant appeasement scheme. Along with a category such as 'States with over 100 urban local bodies (ULB),' where Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh were ranked second and third, respectively, there was also a top ranker for 'State with less than 100 ULBs' where Jharkhand was judged the cleanest. Then there was a category for a 'Ganga' city and separate population-wise categories. This year there was a novel 'Prerak Daaur Samman' that saw Indore, Surat, Navi Mumbai, New Delhi Municipal Council and Tirupati categorised as 'divya' (platinum). They were assessed for solid waste management. Unsurprisingly, these were entities that had already topped ranks in other categories.

Rankings serve two broad purposes: a publicity boost and recognition for the other winners but also motivation to climb higher on the totem pole. Though the number of cities surveyed has increased since the first edition of the survey in 2016, it appears that the same cities — Indore, Surat, for instance — keep topping the list. Six years is a good time to take stock of what the ranking programme intends to achieve: is it motivating cities to significantly allocate resources towards improving sanitation? Are cleaner cities cleaner because they are better positioned to access State funds and thus able to pull further away from other cities? Do States focus their energies and funds in keeping some cities clean to avail of a rank in any of the wide number of categories? Reducing a metric as complex as sanitation and cleanliness to blunt rankings can often induce a false sense of progress. Both at the regional level and at the Centre there should be more qualitative analysis of whether India's cities are getting cleaner in the aggregate or if numbers are hiding inequity.

Our code of editorial values

U.S. President Biden should not buckle to pressure from irate anti-vaccine campaigners

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