

## THE FINANCIAL EXPRESS

### Edits & Columns

#### Payback time?

##### Repair the growth-public services link

The “global crisis in water does not make media headlines” says this year’s Human Development Report (HDR) and true to its word, it didn’t. If at all, the HDR has been reduced to an annual league table of the Human Development Index (HDI), where India has moved but a few notches since the first report in 1990. But, so what? As goes the usual refrain, we are poor and big and thus it will take time, even with accelerated growth, to reach basic services to all, as compared to smaller countries. As long as we are making progress, should we care about our rank on the HDI? Maybe not, but this HDR is a good occasion to reflect on our progress in water and sanitation.

Officially, almost all of India’s million plus hamlets, a unit even smaller than a village, have access to drinking water under various government schemes. Yet, the Census in 2001 noted that almost 20% of rural households did not have access to water within or near premises, and this did not even account for water quality. An even more worrisome problem is sanitation. Only a little over 20% of rural households had latrines of any sort and even in urban areas only 70% of urban households had one. While this may look good in comparison, the complacency of the cocooned rich should give way to concern when they realise that the disposal habits of the “great unwashed masses” and unregulated industries do have a real possibility of affecting them. If the recent reports on Delhi’s water quality by the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) are anything to go by, the payback time has begun.

This is but another example of the evidently broken link between growth and improved public services. Which affects public goods like water and sanitation more severely, since these, unlike electricity, are difficult to self-provide. Consequently, the rich and articulate tend to monopolise their consumption, while the poor, whether rural or urban, are left without service. Water is in principle recyclable, and need not be scarce, merely a little costlier, at a price most urban users can well bear. But, the singular lack of attention to waste-water treatment, as evidenced by the condition of the Yamuna in Delhi, means that urban India is progressively making our water resources unusable, while reaching further afield to satiate its thirst. The HDR gets it right when it says “scarcity at the heart of the global water crisis is rooted in power, poverty and inequality, not in physical availability.”

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