

How Kerala toppled Gujarat in governance

"Kerala is right on top of the 29 states in governance, followed by Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, according to a recent report."

The newly sworn-in Left Democratic Front in Kerala has its task all clear-cut — to continue with the good governance focused on social equity, but improve on fiscal management, economic freedom and essential infrastructure. A recent report has placed the state right on top of the 29 states in governance, followed by Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.

Following a drubbing at the hands of a World Bank report on ease of doing business, Kerala, which was placed at a poor 18 last year, has been given the thumbs-up on governance, thanks to its strong focus on social and human development. In general, the south turns out to be better governed than the north in the Public Affairs Index

The PAI, developed by think-tank Public Affairs Centre, has relied on a model incorporating both economic growth and social development into the definition of good governance. In fact, its focus on social and human factors pushed industry-favourite Gujarat down, while propping up Kerala. The index clearly shows an emerging relationship between economic growth and social development.

The 10 broad themes covered include essential infrastructure, economic freedom, human development, social protection, women and child welfare, crime and law and order, justice, environment, transparency and fiscal management.

Encompassing 25 focus subjects spread over 68 specific indicators, the index saw Kerala lead the pack in the overall ranking. Gujarat has been pushed down to the fifth position, while Jharkhand and Bihar lie at the bottom of the pile.

Amongst the small states, Mizoram, Himachal Pradesh and Sikkim stand at the top. Over the years, Himachal Pradesh and Sikkim have shown their increasing capacity to perform well in crucial areas of governance, including education and health, notes the report.

The index is aimed to give a common data-driven framework to assess and compare the diverse states of the country. The PAI is claimed to be wider in scope and more comprehensive than other indices developed so far. Apart from the interstate ranking, it also provides theme-wise insights.

A look at the report reveals that social indicators like health, education, welfare of women and children, minorities and an effective judiciary are responsible for Kerala's top ranking, as also for Gujarat's poorer performance. It is in areas where Gujarat tops, like essential infrastructure, economic freedom and fiscal management, that Kerala lags.

The Gujarat model of development, while still significant in the ranking, falls below the top states because of the comparatively lesser rank it holds in certain social indicators, the report noted.

Data used for this study was extracted from various Union Government Ministries and Departments after identifying key dimensions of governance shedding light on the functioning of essential public institutions. On veracity of the data, Dr C K Mathew, former chief secretary of Rajasthan, and senior fellow, PAC, who spearheaded the report measuring performance in terms going beyond growth and GDP, said, "All government data placed on a national data base are checked and rechecked many times and passes the test of verification and scrutiny. Moreover, each state examines the data of the other states too very carefully, as each state wants to be at the top. I can say that they are as good as they can possibly be... though some amount of variations cannot be denied. All such data is also subject to RTI and can be challenged by any citizen, so state governments are careful when they place the information in public domain."

When looking at rankings like environment that places Tamil Nadu and Kerala on top, one wonders how much this can be placed at the door of governance considering certain natural conditions. For instance, some of the factors like forest cover and air pollution could place Kerala on top by virtue of natural circumstances. The state is largely green but a significant section of this comes from plantations that have replaced forests, which is clearly not a good score on environmental governance. So also, air pollution could be relatively low seeing how consecutive states have failed to woo industries.

"Yes, for example, in the indicator of roads, Rajasthan, where the density of population is low, will stand at a disadvantage. Perhaps you do not need roads where there is no population. Rajasthan again will always stand low on the management of water because of poor water availability. Kerala will always stand at the top for health and education. But to balance these natural advantages and disadvantages, we have taken, in many indicators, a three-year picture.

That is to see how far the state has moved against its own performance in the past years. The CAGR is taken over the three year period. For example, if Kerala has a natural advantage in health, let us measure Kerala itself today against what it was three years ago. If Kerala's literacy rate is say 91 % three years ago, what is it today? The CAGR will give this figure," said Mathew.

He emphasized that the index does not implant any biases into the data sets. What applies for one state, will, by the very nature of the all-India statistics, apply for all other states as well, he pointed.

The PAI is based on the growing acceptance that infusion of resources alone does not improve quality of lives unless accompanied by good governance. Human and social factors, in addition to GDP and per capita income, contribute to well-being of the citizen. It also believes that the state while being central to development is only a partner and catalyst along with private sector and civil society.

The report interestingly also covered a 'sentiment analysis' based on media reports around the chosen themes. This was derived from 20,000 articles and twitter feed. Traditional media again ranked Kerala first while Karnataka topped on twitter. In final ranking by media, amongst the big states, Kerala was rated the best-governed state, followed by Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh.

There was a moderate correlation seen between the PAI and poverty estimates obtained from the latest Rangarajan Committee report, but the match with per capita income was weak. A strong correlation was noticed between the index and HDI.

While essential infrastructure was qualified by power, housing, roads and communication, human development was gauged on the basis of education and health. Social protection measured the PDS lift-off, employment and minority welfare, under the justice theme the pending cases and vacancies in judiciary was compared. Environment looked at air pollution, forest cover, environmental violations and renewable energy.

According to the authors of the report, the element of subjectivity is limited to the identification of the indicators used. However, these are claimed to have stood the test of scrutiny for relevance and importance in the Indian context.

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