

GOOD GOVERNANCE BEYOND MOTHERHOOD AND APPLE PIE

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December 19, 2022 12:08 am | Updated 01:56 am IST

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"So, they [the government] go on in strange paradox, decided only to be undecided, resolved to be irresolute, adamant for drift, solid for fluidity, all-powerful for impotency," said Sir Winston Churchill on governance.

Churchill's definition of (bad) governance is applicable even 100 years after he spoke so sagaciously. One of the big achievements of Prime Minister Narendra Modi is that while administrative reforms are, usually, all about motherhood and apple pie proclamations such as "wash your hand before you eat", he has turned at least some of it into action. Usually, good governance has meant cliches and platitudes such as "corruption is bad for good governance", "we should cut red-tape in the country", and "we should use more e-governance in India", but that is now a thing of the past.

First, the Modi government (thanks to the stellar work of economist Bibek Debroy) has [repealed an estimated 2,000 Acts](#), statutes and subordinate legislation which include dozens of Appropriation acts, the Excise Act 1863, Foreign Recruiting Act 1874, Elephants Preservation Act 1879, and Bengal Districts Act, 1836 to name just a few. There is a long way to go, especially for State governments, where such obsolete laws are often tools for rent seeking.

Karnataka is one of India's fastest growing States, with a GSDP of 20.50 lakh crore, 38.34 lakh enterprises, 9.2 lakh provident fund payers, and 70.84 lakh workers. It has 1.1 crore students in schools and 21.8 lakh students pursuing higher education. The State is also the highest exporter of IT services. However, Karnataka ranked 17th in the 2019 Business Reforms Action Plan (BRAP) national rankings, and this presents a significant opportunity for driving institutional reforms with respect to compliance. Avantis RegTech has studied industries and compliance across Indian States and concludes that Karnataka features in the top five States in India in terms of compliance burden. This report highlights 26,134 criminal clauses across India and almost 40% of compliances can send an entrepreneur to jail. Karnataka's employers confront a total of 1,175 State-specific jail clauses and ranks among the top five in the country. A micro,

small and medium enterprise operating in Karnataka currently deals with an average of 778 compliances annually across labour, finance, and taxation, secretarial, environment, health and safety, industry-specific and commercial categories. Imagine the scope for similar good governance across sectors and across 30 States.

Second, for 30 years from 1998, any pecuniary benefit to any private parties, without public interest, regardless of whether there was an intent to cause such gains or not, was construed as criminal misconduct by a public servant. Therefore, even honest officers had to face this cruel law. Thus, if one were to buy laptops from vendor x for a department, and vendor z offered it a few thousands cheaper, one could be hauled up, even without mens rea. This government finally scrapped this provision of the Prevention of Corruption Act, thereby enabling good governance, by allowing officers to act without fear.

Third, another possible small step towards good governance is the DigiLocker (an integral part of the India stack) now has more than five billion documents and 100 million users. Likewise, the Union and State governments can set up enterprise DigiLockers to store all documents that any small or large business is expected to possess (Pan card, GSTN number, Aadhaar card, bank account details, etc.). Multiple departments which seek the same information over and again (often charging a price for it) can just download these at the click of a button. It is simple to set up and will enable another kind of good governance. Karnataka has implemented KUTUMBA (family beneficiary database), FRUITS (Farmer Registration and Unified beneficiary Information System), SVAMITVA (drone-based property and land mapping, or Survey of Villages Abadi and Mapping with Improvised Technology in Village Areas) and GraamaOne (single point assistance centre for citizen centric activities at panchayat level), all leading to more good governance.

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Fourth, today no State government or the Government of India has any common portal, through which businesses even get to know fully the extent of the compliance burden which is spread across multiple departments and agencies. The simplest thing to do would be to create a common portal where all the compliances for a particular industry are listed as well as an update of periodic changes to government orders or any court judgment. This will ensure that an entrepreneur or a businessman does not have to search for information across 40 to 50 different websites. The Reserve Bank of India has the concept of a “master circular” which should be adopted by governments too.

Fifth, the use of technology is critical in engendering good governance. Some examples abound in Government already, and many more are possible. There are startups such as Avantari and Rephrase.ai which use artificial intelligence and machine learning (AI/ML) to create “mass personalization” in advertising and communication. Imagine the Prime Minister or a Chief Minister addressing every citizen of his constituency by name and having a personalised message about the various welfare schemes. Or a Chief Minister inviting the Top Fortune 500 CEOs by name and with a specific incentive about their industry, to invest in his State. All this is happening with AI-augmented videos.

Lastly, everyone aspires for a better standard of living and life — this is as universal as the sun rising in the East. I can bet there is no one in India who does not want the quality of health care that is there in Scandinavia or the United States. However, India’s tax to GDP ratio hovers around 11%-12% as against 45% in the U.S. One is not aware of a single Budget meeting where any industry association or leader would say tax us more in national interest and use the funds to improve primary health care in the country. Everyone says, leave me alone, but tax my neighbour. So, where should the Indian government find resources for providing U.S.-like health care with India-like taxes? Good governance is also the responsibility of enlightened citizens

who should give some thought to complex trade-offs like these and not just only demand good governance but also contribute to it.

In sum, India has made a lot of progress on good governance beyond motherhood, but it is an endless journey; not a one-off destination to be reached. As India enters its good governance week (December 19-25, 2022), we can be satisfied that we will soon prove Churchill wrong.

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