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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

# Gujarat's Development Paradox — High Income, Lagging Human Development

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# Gujarat's Development Paradox — High Income, Lagging Human Development

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## THE EDITORIAL ARGUMENT

Gujarat at 66 is celebrated globally as a successful Indian development model. The state has India's **highest per-capita income among large states** (~₹3.5 lakh), the largest manufacturing footprint per capita, and the longest coastline (1,600 km) feeding port-led trade. Investment summits, special economic zones, and infrastructure investment have made Gujarat the laboratory for state-led capitalism in post-1991 India.

Yet Gujarat's social development indicators — child malnutrition, female literacy, infant mortality — consistently lag the state's income level. This gap, documented by economists Amartya Sen and Jean Drèze in their influential 2013 book *An Uncertain Glory*, has narrowed but not closed. At 66, Gujarat's challenge is not whether to grow further. It is how to translate its accumulated economic gains into human well-being.

## THE NUMBERS BEHIND THE PARADOX

Gujarat's per-capita income is approximately ₹3.5 lakh — the highest among large Indian states. By that measure alone, Gujarat ranks alongside Haryana and Karnataka in economic terms.

Compare this with key social indicators:

- **Child stunting** (NFHS-5, 2019-21): Gujarat — 39%; National average — 35.5%
- **Female literacy**: Gujarat — 70.7%; National average — 70.3% (slim margin)
- **Infant mortality rate** (per 1,000 births): Gujarat — 28; National average — 28
- **Out-of-pocket health expenditure**: Gujarat households spend a larger share than national average

Gujarat's social indicators are roughly at the national average — which is concerning because the state's per-capita income is far above national average. A state with ₹3.5 lakh per-capita income should have substantially better social indicators than a state with ₹1.5 lakh per-capita income. Gujarat does not.

## WHY THE GAP PERSISTS

Several structural factors contribute:

- 1. Public spending pattern.** Gujarat’s social sector spending (health + education + welfare) as a share of GSDP has historically been below the all-India average. The state’s strength has been in infrastructure investment, industrial promotion, and fiscal discipline — not in human development spending.
- 2. Tribal districts under-served.** Gujarat’s tribal-dominated districts (Dahod, Panchmahal, Narmada) have human development indicators significantly below state averages. Tribal welfare schemes have been less effective in Gujarat than in some smaller states with similar tribal populations.
- 3. Female workforce participation low.** Gujarat’s female labour force participation rate (~22-25%) is below the all-India average. Female workforce engagement is one of the strongest predictors of household-level human development.
- 4. Migrant worker conditions.** Gujarat hosts a large migrant workforce in its diamond, textiles, and chemical industries. Their living conditions and access to social services are inadequate, depressing aggregate human development indicators.

## THE SAURASHTRA-SOUTH GUJARAT DIVIDE

Gujarat’s development story is also one of regional inequality:

| REGION   | PROFILE  |
|--|--|
| <b>South Gujarat (Surat-Vadodara-Bharuch belt)</b> | Highest industrial output; highest income; best social indicators                  |
| <b>Central Gujarat (Ahmedabad-Gandhinagar)</b>     | Strong urban concentration; commercial centre                                      |
| <b>Saurashtra and Kutch</b>                        | Agricultural base; some industrial growth (Mundra Port); slower social development |
| <b>Tribal Gujarat</b>                              | Eastern districts; significant development gap                                     |

The Vibrant Gujarat investment summit model has primarily benefited the South Gujarat industrial corridor. Saurashtra’s agricultural distress and Kutch’s water scarcity are less visible in development showcases.

## WHAT YEAR 66 SHOULD LOOK LIKE

Gujarat’s next development phase should focus on:

- ❶ **Substantial social sector spending increase** — health and education spending as share of GSDP should match per-capita income standing (currently a mismatch)
- ❷ **Tribal welfare overhaul** — direct beneficiary identification and outcome tracking; not just budget allocation
- ❸ **Female workforce engagement programme** — public-private partnership to enable women’s economic participation
- ❹ **Migrant worker rights framework** — formal recognition of migrant workforce contributions and protections
- ❺ **Saurashtra water security** — multi-decade water infrastructure investment beyond seasonal drought packages

CM Bhupendra Patel’s continuing tenure offers political stability. The question is whether this stability translates into the deeper reforms that Gujarat’s economy can now afford.

## THE LARGER LESSON

Gujarat’s development model — high investment, high growth, modest welfare — was appropriate for the 1990s-2010s when India’s development priority was generating jobs and lifting GDP. In 2026, with India approaching upper-middle-income status, the priority must shift toward inclusive development. Gujarat, as the original development laboratory, has the responsibility to demonstrate this transition.

## UPSC RELEVANCE

| PAPER                  | ANGLE  |
|------------------------|--|
| GS3 — Economy          | Gujarat development model; regional inequality; manufacturing-led growth |
| GS2 — Governance       | Social sector spending; welfare delivery; state policy choices           |
| GS3 — Inclusive Growth | Human development indicators; gender; tribal welfare                     |

**Mains Keywords:** Gujarat development model, human development index, Vibrant Gujarat, child stunting, female labour force participation, NFHS-5, tribal welfare, regional inequality, social sector spending, Saurashtra-Kutch

### Prelims Facts Corner

| ITEM                              | FACT                                    |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Gujarat formation                 | May 1, 1960                             |
| Current CM                        | Bhupendra Patel                         |
| Per-capita income                 | ~₹3.5 lakh (highest among large states) |
| Child stunting                    | 39% (Gujarat); 35.5% (national)         |
| Coastline                         | 1,600 km (longest in India)             |
| Manufacturing share               | ~17% of India's                         |
| Female labour force participation | ~22-25% (Gujarat)                       |
| First Vibrant Gujarat             | 2003                                    |
| Mahagujarat Movement leader       | Indulal Yagnik                          |

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