

Mahesh Sharma's performance as a minister for culture doesn't match up to his achievements as a tourism minister

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In the budget for 2017-18, five ministries - tourism, culture, sports and youth affairs, environment and climate change and social justice and empowerment - were allocated a total of Rs 16,104 crore, just 1.51 per cent of the Rs 10,62,751 crore allocated for various sectors. This number is some indication of the Modi government's emphasis - or lack of it - on these ministries. According to a March 2017 report by the World Travel and Tourism Council, the tourism industry in India directly supported 25.3 million jobs, which is 5.8 per cent of the country's total jobs.

In the World Economic Forum's list on travel and tourism competitiveness this year, India has been ranked 40, a considerable jump of 12 places from 2015. It's also the biggest leap any country has taken in that ranking. India's travel and tourism sector was also the fastest growing amongst G20 nations, growing by 8.5 per cent in 2016.

Experts believe the growth has been propelled by initiatives such as recognising five tourist circuits and a boost to religious tourism, but poor infrastructure still remains a big impediment to growth. "The government should focus on building world-class leisure destination infrastructure," says Deep Kalra, chairman and CEO of makemytrip.com. What also remains a challenge is that these figures are predominantly generated by domestic travel, which accounted for 88 per cent of the sector's contribution to GDP in 2016.

However, Mahesh Sharma's performance as a minister for culture doesn't match up to his achievements as a tourism minister. He has introduced some transparency in the grants of funds and scholarships, but several institutes under the ministry remain headless.

The biggest reform by the ministry of social justice and empowerment has been the decision to disband the National Commission for Backward Classes (NCBC) and replace it with a National Commission for Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (NCSEBC). More than reform, it was a reaction to two developments. Firstly, it was the BJP's tacit acknowledgement that support from Other Backward

Classes played a crucial role in its victory in the Uttar Pradesh elections. The decision came within a week of Jat agitators from Haryana threatening to disrupt life in Delhi. The UPA government had included that community in the Central OBC list a day before the 2014 parliamentary polls were announced, but the notification was scrapped by the Supreme Court. The BJP government perhaps doesn't want a repeat of that situation.

Another development is the 35 per cent rise from last year in funds allocated for the welfare of Scheduled Castes. Nearly 54 per cent of the ministry's budget is spent on scholarships for Scheduled Castes. With the launch of the Accessible India Campaign, special camps have been organised for distribution of aids and assistive devices to 600,000 people with disabilities. The types of disabilities have been increased from 7 to 21. Quota for people with disabilities in government jobs has been increased from 3 to 4 per cent.

In sports, despite minister Vijay Goel's personal intervention, there has been no major reform. The government is planning to table the new national sports code in the monsoon session of Parliament. Panels have been set up to prepare athletes for the next Olympics and new schemes launched to find sporting talent, but the pace of execution remains slow. "The government must create an institutional framework that instils confidence in parents and children to take up sports as a full-time career," says team India footballer Gouramangi Singh.

In the environment ministry, Anil Madhav Dave's target is to bring down the average waiting period for project approval to 100 days. His toughest challenge, however, will be to make a final decision after the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee recommended approval for the commercial production of GM mustard. The BJP's ideological parent, the RSS, is vehemently opposed. For now, there is respite for Dave as a parliamentary standing committee is looking into the issue.

From introducing e-visas to recognising tourist circuits and launching a vernacular interface for international travellers, Mahesh Sharma has offered a significant promotional boost to the industry. "We have sanctioned Rs 4,800 crore for theme-based circuits under the Swadesh Darshan Yojana; Rs 488 crore has been allocated for spiritual tourism," he says. "It will take us about a year to complete these projects." The ministry's drafting of a new tourism policy has been welcomed by Aditi Chanchani, director of Equations, a non-profit organisation that studies the impact of tourism on local communities. At the same time, she is not entirely pleased with the ministry's approach. "The ministry sought contributions only from formal stakeholders.... There is no acknowledgement of people whose homes and backyards are promoted as tourism destinations," she says. As culture minister, Sharma has fewer accomplishments. "It has revived the IGNCA, and it is easier for artists to apply for and get grants," says Ashish Mohan Khokar, an authority on

Indian arts and culture. But there is still no word on a cultural policy and no assessment of organisations such as the Sangeet Natak Akademi.