

TRANSFORMING VILLAGES: UPLIFTING THE MASSES

Dhurjati Mukherjee

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India is a country living in villages, as even today, over 65 per cent of the population lives there. All our great leaders, from Mahatma Gandhi to Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam, have advocated the need of transforming the villages as the key to the inclusive development of the country. So the government's focus on rural India, as visible in this year's budget and various schemes for farmers' welfare, is a right step in right direction.

Rurban development has rightly been identified as present government's ambitious plan of improving infrastructure like roads, power, water and sanitation in a bid to develop the villages. Though this is easier said than done, but a well knit coordinated strategy with adequate financial support may transform the rural sector in the coming years.

A scheme called **Shyama Prasad Mukherji Rurban Mission** was launched which is a reflection of former President, Dr APJ Abdul Kalam's idea of PURA (Providing Urban Amenities in Rural Areas). The scheme is expected to deliver infrastructure in rural areas, which also includes development of economic activities and skill development. Some time back, the President Pranab Mukherjee in his address to Parliament, reiterated this aspect by stating, "the government will strive to end the rural-urban divide guided by the idea of **rurban**, providing urban amenities to rural by preserving the ethos of the villages." However, the methodology of implementation will only prove the government's sincerity in this regard.

The funds allocated in the Budget 2015-16 clearly show that the government is geared to revamping the rural sector. The four-pronged strategy to achieve growth has been rightly centered on (i) agriculture, (ii) rural infrastructure development and (iii) skill creation and employment, and (iv) health – all of which have been designed to boost up the path of rural development.

The various schemes of the government bear testimony to the fact that rural development is, no doubt, a priority before the government even in a constrained fiscal environment.

First and the foremost, one may refer to the **Saansad Adarsh Gram Yojana (SAGY)** – launched on the birth anniversary of Jayprakash Narayan -- a unique programme aimed at "instilling certain values in the village and its people such as fostering mutual cooperation, self-help and self-reliance, enabling the poorest person in the village to come out of poverty and achieve well-being, preserving and promoting local cultural heritage, etc."



According to the scheme, every Member of Parliament (MP) would adopt a village Panchayat to be developed through government schemes and local initiative. While Lok Sabha members can adopt a Panchayat within their constituency, Rajya Sabha members can adopt any within the state they represent. There are 2,65,000 Gram Panchayats in the country. Primarily the goal is to develop three **Adarsh Grams** by March 2019 of which one would be achieved by 2016. Thereafter, five such **grams** – one per year – would be selected and developed by the year 2024, as per an official note.

Some of the selected Panchayats have started getting priority for developing infrastructure under existing schemes like the National Health Mission, MGNREGS, ICDS and also the recent **Swachh Bharat Abhiyan**. The plan envisages a model village with schools that have computers and toilets, health facilities for complete immunization, gym and yoga centres, drinking water, household toilets for all and facilities for solid and liquid waste management.

The scheme would be implemented through a village development plan that would be prepared for every identified *Gram Panchayat* with special focus on enabling every poor household to come out of poverty. Such integrated plan was a long felt need and would go a long way in making the villages self-reliant and self-sufficient, as visualized by Gandhi Ji long back. There is also a need for renewable energy and modernization and diversification of micro, cottage and village-based industries. This has become imperative at this point of time for the country to make rapid strides on the path of social and economic development.

The enormity of the challenge cannot be denied as around 50 per cent of the six lakh villages have very poor social and physical infrastructural facilities. The SAGY is obviously a beginning and it remains to be seen how many villages could be adopted and whether there is proper planning before execution of the schemes for integrated development. One need not be pessimistic as after a long time the government has thought of an integrated plan of village development. However, it would have been better if the government had roped in NGOs and community based organizations in implementing this ambitious programme.

It goes without saying that there is also need to develop the social and physical infrastructure of the rural areas. While inter-district and village roads need to be constructed, power generation for at least Six to eight hours or more is also equally necessary. As regards to the social infrastructure, India's spending on both education and health is much below than the other BRIC countries. Targets have been set but most of these have not been achieved.

One is inclined to refer to our late President, Dr. Kalam, who visualized **PURA** (*providing*

urban facilities in rural areas) to reform the village economy and put a check on the exodus of villagers to already congested and densely populated cities. As per his plan, which was very much on Gandhian lines, he identified five areas which would lead to food, economic, energy and national security and sustainable prosperity. This would have to be accomplished through agriculture and food processing, education and healthcare, infrastructure for all parts of the country (such as reliable and quality electricity, surface and air transport), information and communication technology and self-reliance in strategic sectors. As an idealist, he felt very strongly towards poverty eradication but lack of proper strategy coupled with resource constraint, as also the lack of political may have deferred this by say another 10 to 12 years or more.

These aspects also need to be included in the future plan for a comprehensive development of the villages. The *Gram Panchayats* have to be strengthened and given complete charge as they are the best to formulate and execute the present village development plans, keeping in view the needs of the community. It is pertinent to mention here that the Prime Minister has categorically pointed out the there would be a bottom-up approach, adding that the scheme would be demand driven, not supply-driven. "The villagers will decide their development needs", PM stated, echoing the decentralisation concept of Mahatma Gandhi.

Another significant work of rural rejuvenation has been the launch of the nationwide '**Skill India Mission**' to promote entrepreneurship and equip 50 crore Indians with skills by the year 2022. This is, no doubt, an ambitious programme. The **National Policy for Skill Development & Entrepreneurship 2015** – part of the Mission – is aimed at empowering those left out of the mainstream education system by incentivising skill training through financial rewards to candidates who successfully complete approved training programmes.

This has the potential of opening up avenues for employment on a big scale and partly tackling the problem of unemployment and underemployment existing mainly in the rural areas. "If China is like a 'manufacturing factory' of the world, India should become the 'human resource capital' of the world. That should be our target and we should lay

emphasis on that," PM Modi said addressing the launch event of Skill India in New Delhi.

It is significant to mention here that a process of IT related facilities to make the rural people financially and socially secure has been started through public-private participation since 2007. **The Common Service Centres (CSCs)** -- opened by companies like *Sahaj-e-Village*, CMS Computers, Vayam Tech, offer a single window, one-stop solution to the various needs of the citizens and bring government, business and education services to rural India through an expanding network of village level franchise partners. The present programmes of SAGY and *Jan Dhan Yojana* are also expected to be carried forward by these CSCs and benefit the rural populace in a big way so that the concept of PURA is fulfilled in letter and spirit.

Moreover, in tune with the National IT Policy, these CSCs are engaged in making one individual in every rural household digitally literate and this project is proposed in a phased manner to around five lakh beneficiaries in 10 states of the country.

Meanwhile, the Human Resource Development Ministry has asked the eight older IITs to adopt 10 villages each and the new IITs five each. Under the **Unnat Bharat Abhiyan**, IIT teachers and students will visit the villages, study their problems and work out effective solutions. In order to implement the solutions, industries may be drafted to manufacture products based on the technologies devised. Each IIT already has a rural development wing, focusing on issues such as contamination of water, poor sanitation, food processing and preservation and personal equipment to lessen labourers' burden. However, this work has to be steadily extended to more and more villages and even private engineering colleges should be roped in to carry out this sort of activity.

As regards rural infrastructure, the target of 100 per cent rural electrification (for nearly 18,500 unelectrified villages) will be met by March 31, 2017, a year ahead of schedule, according to Power Minister Shri Piyush Goyal. He told this while addressing a session on energy at the Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi, a global conclave on geopolitics and geo-economics organised by the ministry of external affairs and the Observer Research Foundation. However, though the target

set may be difficult to achieve in the practical sense, even if 90 per cent of remaining villages are properly electrified, the benefits would indeed be immense.

In addition, the thrust on rural roads by earmarking Rs 19,000 crore under **Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana** is significant. In fact, the total budgetary allocation for roads and highways has been increased to Rs 55,000 crores and the total allocation, including PMGSY, comes to around Rs 97,000 crores. Both rural roads and electrification would go a long way in developing the countryside and transforming the villages.



Finally one may refer to the job scheme – **Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS)** – which also has been accorded priority by earmarking Rs 38,500 crore compared to Rs 34,699 crore last year.

But, as under the directive of Supreme Court, the government had to release of Rs 12,930 crore of funds to states to take care of the backlog for 2015-16. Because of this, current year's allocation may face shortfall of funds at the end of the fiscal. However, as the Finance Minister had stated that the job scheme would be provided all financial support for success, it could be assumed the necessary funds' shortfall would be replenished. Assuming that another Rs 2,000- 2,500 crores are needed, it would be the highest sum spent in a year, according to Shri Jaitley. Moreover, the assets created would serve the **twin purpose of rural economic development and job creation**.

While implementation of reforms in making the scheme more oriented to combat agrarian distress, especially in 10 states, is a very positive

step, more resources would probably be needed. More so because the government has decided to extend the entitlement from 100 to 150 days in drought-affected regions.

It also needs to be pointed out that scarcity of water has been increasing due to two successive weak monsoons and virtually no rainfall in the first four months of 2016. In the current fiscal, states have proposed to construct 8.82 lakh farm ponds and increase the irrigation potential under the MGNREGS. Here again the need for more funds may have to be considered.

Similarly, the setting up of 300 Rurban Clusters under the *Shyama Prasad Mukherjee Rural Mission* and the strengthening of the *Krishi Vigyan Kendras* are steps in the right direction.

One may also mention here the enhanced outlay on agriculture and farmers' welfare has been around Rs 36,000 crore with a target to increase crop yield in rain-fed areas and to increase agricultural credit from Rs 8.5 lakh crore in the past year to Rs 9 lakh crores in 2016-17, reflecting quite clearly the government's concern for the rural sector. It is significant that **keeping in view the distress of farmers, there is a provision in the budget of Rs 15,000 crores to ease the burden of loan repayment by farmers.**

What PM announced on February 28, reiterated by Finance Minister in his budget, was that efforts would be geared up to boost up the agricultural sector and **double the income of the farming community in the next 5-6 years.** Though there has been criticism about the announcement, the very intention needs to be applauded and shows the government's concern in this regard. Obviously doubling incomes in five years implies an average growth of 14.9 per cent annually which may be quite difficult to achieve but even 60 to 75 per cent rise in five years may go a long way in changing the face of the villages.

There is no denying that the rural sector has to be rejuvenated and the disparity in incomes and facilities between urban and rural areas needs to be reduced to the extent possible. **Rurban** development has rightly been identified as present government's ambitious plan for improving infrastructure like roads, power along with water and sanitation in

a bid to develop the villages. It is expected in the coming years PM would give due weightage to the rural sector where the needs are much more and both social and physical infrastructure development is a prime need at this crucial juncture.

Rejuvenation of the rural sector is imperative at this juncture. Though this may not help in high GDP growth but would have a grass root effect which in turn, would boost up incomes of the economically weaker sections and the poor. There is no point in very high GDP growth with heavy mechanisation and industrialisation without any direct effect on the masses. Moreover, if the benefits of such growth do not reach to the people at the bottom tiers of society and income disparity widens, such approach to development would indeed be futile.

In a country like India where population growth and density both are high, development has to be inclusive, balanced and sustainable in such a way that both industrialisation – especially labour intensive small and micro industries – and agriculture move side by side so that the total effect is beneficial for the common masses.

One may conclude with the prophetic observation of Mahatma Gandhi, who was a strong advocate of development from bottom. Gandhi Ji predicted as early as 1940, "I do visualise electricity, ship building, iron works, machine making existing side by side with village crafts. Hitherto, industrialisation has been so planned as to destroy the villages and village crafts. In the state of the future, it will subserve the villages and their crafts." In other words, he wanted mass production to be replaced by production by the masses. This observation has become very relevant today as rampant industrialisation – ignoring environmental and other concerns – has had disastrous consequences for the rural economy and society.

Thus, the strategy of development has to be such that the majority benefits and the poverty is steadily eradicated from the country. And this would become a reality if the thrust is on the rural sector whose transformation would boost up income levels and living standards of the masses.

(Author a Social Activist and Gandhian Scholar, is Senior Consultant with Sahaje-Village. E-mail: dhurjatimukherjee54@gmail.com)