

SMART VILLAGE: AN INITIATIVE FOR SUSTAINABLE VILLAGES

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A ccording to NITI AYOJ, a settlement with a maximum population of 15,000 is considered as a "Village". Much of India's rural population lives in nucleated villages, which most commonly have a settlement form described as shapeless agglomerate. India being a rural dominated country, the smartness concept is not even thought about in the rural areas. According to 2011 Census, the population of rural areas comprised of 68.84 per cent. Villages are the heart of our nation. However, large scale migration of the people from rural areas to urban areas, has its own risk parameters on the urban areas. If the vision of the founders of this Nation is to be respected and implemented, then we all have the responsibility to make our villages smart, which means self-sufficient, efficient, healthy and educated villagers. To make the villages smart means to make the country self-reliant, stronger and secured. Some of the ways include offering basic facilities, education, employment generation activities, technology etc.

Concept of Smart Village:

The concept of the smart village is not constructed on the image of a city or a very developed village of some states or nations. It is not an adopted smartness, but an avenue to show the inherent smartness of the villages.

One of the most important factors totally disregarded by the development policies and programmes, misinterpreted heavily and ill considerate for many years is to make the villagers' sense of possessiveness and belonging to their own villages more concrete and visible through public policies or institution. India lives in its villages. Close to 70 per cent of India's population still resides in more than 2.5 lakh villages. This is the food basket of the nation. Village panchayats have become the centres of grass root democracy. However, the holistic development of rural India is still under tremendous pressure owing to the declining farm output, increasing trend of distressed migration, absence of basic amenities

and emerging problems of environmental pollution and conflicts.

The general imagination of the people in urban areas is that the rural is a static, timeless domain where people are bare-minimalists who lack ambition and entrepreneurship. Given an opportunity, a village has all the potential to be at par with all sorts of development socially, scientifically, economically and environmentally. If we know the eco-system of the Indian villages, truly there are all the opportunities and avenues to make our villages - our country a sustainably developing nation.

A smart village feels that its citizen know its available resources, applicable services and schemes. It knows what it needs and when it needs. Focused areas of the Smart village initiative are improved resource-use efficiency, empowered local self-governance, access to assured basic amenities and responsible individual and community behaviour to build a vibrant and happy society. The major thrust behind the concept on "Smart Village" is that the technology should act as a means for development, enabling education and local business opportunities, improving health and welfare, enhancing democratic engagement and overall enhancement of rural village dwellers. The Information and Communication Technology has proved its potential in various sectors of development in urban and rural areas. And here in the smart village concept, the use of the Information and telecommunication is surely a major priority area.

The ratio of school dropouts at school or college level is quite high amongst the rural youth which is negatively impacting the education policy and targets of the Government. Added to this is the non-availability of vocational avenues in rural environments which is further adversely affecting the aspirations of the youth from the rural areas. All such youth with little education, no vocational skills and passing through utter poverty, find their way

to nearest urban cities or large cities where they migrate to find some source of livelihood. The rural youth finds a great disconnect with the way of life in cities which impacts him culturally, professionally and mentally only to add to his woes and thrusts him on the path of crime, except in few cases. This results in tremendous socio-economic disconnect.

The concept of smart village includes a bundle of dozens of services delivered effectively to the residents and businesses in an efficient manner. These services could be location specific depending on the demography of the village and occupations of the residents.

For the development of smart village, a cluster approach can be followed. Each district may be divided in cluster of 10 to 15 villages (consisting of a specific number of population say 50-75,000). Each district could have seven to 20 such clusters of villages depending on its size of population and then design the blue print to develop Infrastructure like roads, buildings, bridges, water, sewage, schools, colleges, hospitals and other facilities as per need based on local talent available, local vocations available, local raw materials/facilities available, service/vocational avenues available locally or in the district or within the state.

The smart village concept should formulate Growth Strategies for the village to make it self-sufficient taking into account the investment climate and protecting native occupation and heritage of the village. The residents should be trained in providing these services and the funding agencies, microfinance institutions and NGOs can be approached for creating a financial eco-system to develop a development chain.

Need for Smart Villages:

The smart village concept is needed for a sustainable and a secured future. This will act as a catalyst to appreciate and facilitate the challenges and welcome the outcomes of an empowered village. It is about understanding the villages towards the growth model which is inclusive. It's about achieving a higher goal without compromising the roots and the sense of belongingness of the masses. The concept of smart village is contemporary and very reliable today as there is a limit of the growth of cities

which is leading to creation of urban jungles, where the population ratio and its related issues per km of land is way above the desired norms. A smart village should be interactive and multi-functional and provisions must be there for active participation of people in various activities. A smart village is one which will automatically link local production with local procurement and local distribution. A smart village will also have the power, knowledge, healthcare, technology, entrepreneurship and quicker connectivity in terms of information acquiring and dissipation besides being capable to execute the responsibilities to the best possible manner. A smart village will not only bring Internet connection to the rural lands, but will also provide support to sustainable agricultural practices.

Simply parroting the much standardised views and ideas of some selected institutions shall not suffice the needs and requirements of our villages. We need customized solutions and procedures specific to the concerned villages. Indian villages are located in different geographies and ecosystems with definite and concretely embedded respective differences in terms of needs, cultures, values and requirements. Emptying villages is no longer considered a growth imperative. Focus on the village economy with sincere efforts to create economic conditions such that more and more people contribute to the growth of the village economy, farming on their own land, producing more from their own fields shall lighten the burden of the migrants to the cities looking for menial jobs. The simplest method to push for rural-urban migration has been to starve agriculture of adequate financial support and keep the farmers impoverished by giving them low prices for their produce.

Some Parameters of a Smart Village: Addressing the Challenges

Agriculture and Agro-based Services:

The Indian economy is still highly dependent on the agricultural sector. A huge population essentially translates into a need to address the growing food demands each year. And the Indian villagers and the villages where they are residing are dependent on agricultural

activities. Hence, aiming for a smart village in India requires us to see the agricultural activities happening in the villages. Strengthening village economy should be the priority for a smart village. It is important to turn farming economically viable not only because a large proportion of the population is engaged in agriculture, directly as well as indirectly, but also to provide financial support for setting up rural infrastructure. The former President of India Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam had a serious belief about the importance of providing urban amenities in the rural areas. Facilities like educational institutions, colleges, hospitals, along with agri-based industries in the villages as well as at the block level will create opportunities within rural areas, thereby drastically reducing the migration to urban centres. Making the villages self-reliant as far as their food security needs are concerned and this would require synergy of the provisions under Food Security Law with farming systems. Every cluster of village at the block or tehsil level should be encouraged to follow the principles of ensuring local production, local procurement and local distribution.

Electronic Delivery of Citizen-centric Service :

Electronic services if managed properly are a great equaliser. They are transparent, efficient and cost effective. Various access points for delivery of various electronic services to villages in India must be arranged. This will surely contribute to a digitally, socially and financially inclusive society.

Mobile Health Unit:

To transform rural areas to economically, socially and physically sustainable spaces, the health condition of the people in the rural areas need to be taken care of. Health care is now regarded as the public right and as an important responsibility of governments to provide this care to all people irrespective of race, religion, caste, creed, urban or rural, rich or poor. Villagers in India even today are so distantly placed as far as the provisioning of the health care is concerned. Here, mobile health care shall act as an important bridge to connect the gaps. In this regard, the mobile health unit that visit and share the health care to the rural areas must be guided by relevance that is, it should be based on the health needs and

demands of the people. If the system lacks the local participation, it will not be long lasting and sustainable.

Pure Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation

Pure drinking water and good sanitation are essential prerequisites for good health and hygiene. Most of the epidemics and ill health in India is mainly due to communicable diseases caused by oral faecal routes. Open defecation along with contaminated water are still the major challenge in our villages to day. A smart village must have this aim to eliminate the above mentioned problems. Innovative approaches to improve water supply and sanitation must be tested well and introduced in the villages. Community-led total sanitation and public-private partnerships to improve the supply of pure drinking water and sanitation should be practiced.

Skill Development Training for Economic Activities:

Considerable evidences are there for the marginalisation of rural populations and the incidence of poverty within rural areas. In terms of access to services, including education and training rural people in general, are the inaugurator. Rural people are most likely in many settings, to be amongst those who are not being reached in the drive towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Moreover, such problems are typically starker for rural women and girls, given their multiple burdens. Skills and knowledge are essential driving forces of economic growth and social development of any country. They have become even more important given the increasing pace of globalization, and technological change that is taking place in the world. Countries with higher and better levels of skills adjust more



effectively to the challenges and opportunities of globalization. Smart villages should take best opportunities to showcase the area and region specific skills and wisdom to the world.

Street Lights:

Solar powered street lights have all the required means today to lighten up the villagers in terms of the sense of security. Solar LED street lighting will provide a high quality, sustainable lighting solution for people in remote areas who don't have access to the conventional electricity grid. It will help in increasing the level of safety on roads and streets and allowing for more economic and social activity.

Waste Management:

Everywhere there is a rise of a consumer culture. And the villages are being introduced to this invading culture. Unorganised growth model has seen in the forms of mammoth heaps of waste in many cities. This form of growth that generates more waste than efficient consumption of resources must not be replicated in our villages. Sustainable waste management, conversion of rural waste into rural wealth will help our villages to be free from unwanted waste that is left uncollected. This will make the working conditions much better and will definitely help in improving the life expectancy of the locals.

Climate and Biodiversity:

Climate change today is a reality and is no longer a fiction. Climate change directly or indirectly affects the culture, productivity, disease outbreak and many other socio-economic problems. Practical steps must be taken up today for the rural people to adapt their livelihood activities to secure and dependable food supplies. Every practical adaptation option to improve food security and resilience must be properly scrutinised and efforts be made to promote the better ones with priority.

Biodiversity is the totality of the varieties, variability among the organisms and the habitats or the environment where they are found. It is an important natural resource. Conservation of biodiversity and renewable exploitation of the biodiversity shall help in sustaining the economic,

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health and welfare of the villages. Investment towards the conservation of biodiversity without confronting the rights and welfare of the people shall pave a secured way towards attaining a sustainable society and a secured future for all. Conservation of biodiversity is for the sustainable rural livelihoods besides enjoying the fruits of the balanced conditions of the surroundings.

Smart villages can translate into improved farm productivity, water conservation and economic independence to village youth. It makes great social, economic and political sense.

Conclusion:

Creation of opportunities for youths in villages is the major requirement priority for a smart village programme and policy. Discouraging migration to cities should not be an advice or suggestion, rather making the village self-sufficient and serviceable shall surely attract the villagers to remain productive in their own homes and villages. Proper guidance and mentoring to small farmers on how to get the best yield for the market at remunerative prices must be provided. The benefits of schemes of the Government must be directed efficiently. Every villager must be educated to rediscover his strengths and opportunities available in his village. Creating an eco-system that makes youth interested in working from their villages is a challenge that is worth taking.

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