

SMART VILLAGES: A WAY FORWARD

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Swami Vivekananda, the young monk who had wandered through the length and breadth of India had observed—“*Let new India arise out of peasants’ cottage, grasping the plough, out of huts, cobbler and sweeper.*” Such is the power of Bharat that has been the foundation to the emerging India of today.

Villages form the building blocks of our country. Agriculture, considered to be the principal source of income in the villages, contributes to around 17 per cent of Indian GDP, which is much higher than the world average of 6.1 per cent. However, a trend to migrate from village to city has steadily increased over the past couple of years, leading to the question of how the reverse migration can be done.

Infrastructure in the Villages:

Most Indian villages are yet to avail the basic necessities to lead a healthy life like access to education, healthcare, drinking water, electricity, toilets (both domestic and public) with proper water supply and proper road infrastructure. In addition,



to keep a pace with the modern technological innovations like mobile phone, internet etc. which are essential for making the country digital, Indian villages are lagging much behind. Holistic development of any village would mean addressing these basic needs. Different Governments over successive years have tried to address the issues.

However, the first concrete step in empowering the villages was in 1992 when the 73rd Constitutional Amendment was adopted. It decreed the organization of village panchayats so that they can function as the local self-governments.

It was not before a decade that a Fundamental Duty was added by the 86th Constitutional Amendment in 2002, which urged parents or legal guardians to provide opportunities for education to their child, or as the case may be, ward between the ages of six to fourteen years. The Right to Education was passed in 2009 making education compulsory for children between the ages of 6 to 14 years.

The National Rural Health Mission was launched in April 2005 with a vision to provide effective health care to rural population throughout the country. The NRHM, as it is popularly called, is continuing till date, bringing lots of changes in the rural life.

Road connectivity was facilitated through the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana. Pradhan Mantri Grameen Awas Yojana ensured housing for all. More such schemes have been undertaken by the Union Government and the various State Governments to improve the quality of life in rural India.

Smart India:

With improved quality of life comes the need of better living. While urban India has leapfrogged

into an age of digitization, embracing the concept of "Smart City", the need to convert villages into "Smart Villages" was also felt. The first step in this direction was taken in September, 2015. In a bid to transform rural areas to economically, socially and physically sustainable spaces, the Shyama Prasad Mukherji Rurban Mission was launched by the Union Government.

Shyama Prasad Mukherji Rurban Mission (SPMRM):

The Mission aims at development of rural growth clusters which have latent potential for growth, in all States and UTs, which would trigger overall development in the region. These clusters would be developed by provisioning of economic activities, developing skills & local entrepreneurship and providing infrastructure amenities. **The Rurban Mission will thus, develop a cluster of Smart Villages.**

Cluster Identification and Development:

The State Governments would identify the clusters in accordance with the Framework for Implementation prepared by the Ministry of Rural Development. The clusters will be geographically contiguous Gram Panchayats with a population of about 25,000 to 50,000 in plain and coastal areas and a population of 5000 to 15000 in desert, hilly or tribal areas. There would be a separate approach for selection of clusters in Tribal and Non-Tribal Districts. As far as practicable, clusters of village would follow administrative convergence units of Gram Panchayats.

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To ensure an optimum level of development, fourteen components have been suggested as desirable for the cluster, which would include



Skill development training linked to economic activities, Agro Processing/Agri Services/Storage and Warehousing, Digital Literacy, Sanitation, Provision of piped water supply, Solid and liquid waste management, Village streets and drains, Street lights, Fully equipped mobile health unit, Upgrading school/higher education facilities, Inter-village road connectivity, Citizen Service Centres for electronic delivery of citizen centric services/e-gram connectivity, Public transport., LPG gas connections.

Development Process of Different Components:

A large number of schemes are being run by the Union Government to address the fourteen components earmarked essentially to make Smart Villages:

- **Skill Development:** The **Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikash Yojana**, under the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship aims to enable a large number of Indian youth to take up industry-relevant skill training that will help them in securing a better livelihood.
- **Digital Literacy:** **Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Saksharata Abhiyan** is expected to be one of the largest digital literacy programmes of the world. As the thrust of the Government is on cashless transactions through mobile phones, the course content would also have emphasis on Digital Wallets, Mobile Banking, Unified Payments Interface (UPI), Unstructured Supplementary Service Data (USSD) and Aadhaar Enabled Payment System (AEPS), etc.



- **Agro-based Scheme-SAMPADA (Scheme for Agro-Marine Processing and Development of Agro-Processing Clusters)** under the Ministry of Food Processing Industries aims to supplement agriculture, modernize processing and decrease agro-waste. Implementation of the scheme will result in creation of modern infrastructure with efficient supply chain management from farm gate to retail outlet. It will not only provide a big boost to the growth of food processing sector in the country, but also help in providing better prices to farmers and is a big step towards doubling of farmers' income.
- **Sanitation:** The **Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Gramin)** aims at making rural India open-defecation free by 2019 by encouraging households to build toilets, thus improving the level of cleanliness in rural India.
- **Drinking Water Supply:** The **National Rural Drinking Water Programme** aims at providing piped water supply to rural households. The programme aims at providing piped water to 90 per cent rural households by 2022, at least 80 per cent of rural households should have piped water supply with a household connection. Less than 10 per cent use public taps and less than 10 per cent use hand pumps or other safe and adequate private water sources.
- **Street Light:** To improve street light conditions, the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy has installed solar PV through the National Solar Mission.
- **Road Connectivity and Public Transport:** The **Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana** is meant to provide good road connectivity in rural India. Complementing this, the **Pradhan**

Mantri Gramin Parivahan Yojana would involve women Self-Help Groups and train them to operate mini-buses to serve village blocks not served by public transport. Rural Self Employment Training Institutes, will now teach driving to women from the SHGs.

- **LPG gas connection:** The **Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana** aims at providing deposit-free LPG connections to BPL family in the name of adult women.

Challenges:

India is a vast country with a lot of challenges. The components needed to make smart villages are definitely well-designed. However, the challenge lies in implementing the programmes effectively. It needs to be kept in mind that only if other socio-economic indicators are good and the basic needs of the village are already met, then can a smart village with a digital future be made possible. A digital future can only be built on top of a physical one.

The preparedness of the villages needs to be taken into account for any programme to be implemented. It needs to be checked that each village has a primary school for the children where there is separate toilets for both male and female children. The basic sense of hygiene needs to be imparted to the children through the schools. Mid-day meal provided to the children should be enough to supplement their nourishment. For secondary and higher secondary education, it may not be possible to have higher secondary schools in each village. As the Government wants to upgrade the education facility, it needs to be ensured that at most, five villages within a radius of 10 kms gets a higher secondary school and a Degree College.

The different scholarships like Pre-Metric, Post-Metric for SC/ST and OBC students are directly credited to the bank accounts. These accounts are linked with the Aadhaar number of the students, which has been made mandatory for receiving the scholarships. Such a step has helped in reducing the ghost beneficiary and interference of middleman and hence is definitely a step towards smart village.

The **Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA)** workers are appointed under the NRHM. They are trained to provide basic medical care to the

villagers. The ASHA workers along with the Auxiliary Nurse Midwife (ANM) form the first interface between the village community and healthcare. If the health records of the individuals of a village can be digitised, then the medical care offered to them can be tracked. But what is more important is that a smart village cluster should have ambulances to ferry patients to referral hospitals. Mobile medical vans can also be arranged for the village clusters to provide basic medical help. Under the **Janani Suraksha Yojana**, eligible pregnant women are entitled for cash assistance irrespective of the age of mother and number of children for giving birth in a government or accredited private health facility. This will help in the reduction of Infant Mortality and Maternal Mortality and in turn, will lead to a healthier society.

Through the **Swachh Bharat Abhiyan**, toilets are to be constructed in every house of the village. Providing toilet and piped water is a basic necessity. Usage of toilet would stop the age-old practice of manual scavenging and at the same time, ensure the safety of women. This in turn, will also increase the hygiene level in the family which is essential for sustaining a healthy family.

The agricultural yields by the farmers need to reach the market in time so that the farmers can recover the investments they have made. For this, connectivity to the nearest *mandi* is essential. **Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchai Yojana-Har Khet Ko Paani** ensures bringing more agricultural land under irrigation. Many schemes in the agriculture sector are undertaken using the Long Term Irrigation Fund under NABARD. The benefits of the same need to reach the farmers.

Financial inclusion will play a key role in making villages smart. The **JAM trinity** of Jan Dhan Account, Aadhaar number and mobile connectivity is expected to be with every Indian. Aiming to provide bank account to every Indian, the Jan Dhan accounts were opened which had Aadhaar number linked and mobile number updated for any transaction. Although, every bank is mandated to have 45 per cent rural penetration, having a bank account still remains elusive to many persons. Banking correspondents or Bank Mitras were appointed by banks to tackle this situation. The same needs to be strengthened so that every person can have a bank account.

The other important area is street lighting. The use of non-renewable source of energy, especially solar energy is designed for electrifying most villages. India, being a tropical country is blessed with sun. However, affordability of solar panels is a big question. The initiative of the Central Government needs to reach the common man more effectively so that they can have access to electricity.

Way Forward:

News regarding achievement of the individual components often are highlighted.

- Akodara village in Sabarkantha district of Gujarat has been declared as India's first digital village.
- Dhasai village in Thane district of Maharashtra has become India's first cashless village.
- Karang, a small lake island in Manipur, has become the country's first cashless island.
- Sikkim was the first state in India to be declared open defecation free followed by Himachal Pradesh.
- Pandri village in Purulia district of West Bengal became the first solar village in the country.

Many such examples can be cited when it is observed that a particular village or a particular district has achieved a critical milestone. All such achievements are indeed laudable and can be used to replicate in other parts of the country.

But only when such a village with all such facilities can be developed, it would be termed as a Smart Village. A holistic approach is needed to develop such a village. Involvement of the Panchayat to implement the Government programmes successfully along with community participation is of utmost necessity to develop the village.

As Mahatma Gandhi said, "*The true Indian civilisation is in the villages.....Take the village people and slum-dwellers in your hands and give them the benefit of your knowledge, skill, insight, constructive work and patriotic spirit...*". Then only can a Smart Village develop and sustain.

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