

Developing Rural India

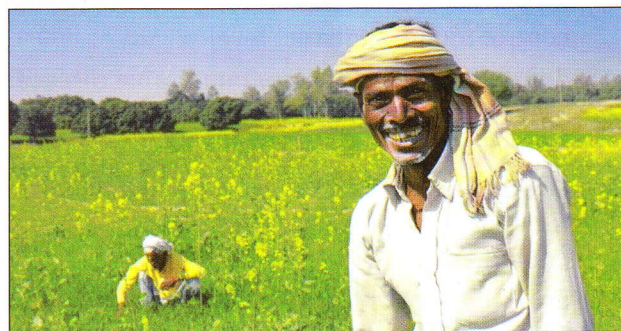
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With agriculture and allied activities forming the major contributor to rural economics; boosting farm incomes, promoting better soil health and diversifying the agricultural palette of the rural areas, all become pertinent to not just higher rural economic growth. It also fulfill India's numerous health, environment and food security commitments globally. Apart from ensuring a minimum standard of life for rural people through welfare schemes and a wider social security net, strengthening the economic fundamentals of rural India is the other half; critical to guaranteeing sustainable and dignified livelihoods for all. To this end, the government has made tremendous strides in making India's rural and village economies more lucrative, diverse and better aligned to fulfilling India's larger economic goals.

That the rural hinterland of the country is also the backbone of our economy is conventional wisdom these days. What is, however, much less known, is the immense potential and promise rural progress holds in powering the world's fifth largest economy to its zenith in the years to come. This is what this article asserts- by tracing the past seven years of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's approach towards sustainable and inclusive rural development.

Since assuming office in 2014, Prime Minister Modi has accorded high priority to India's rural economy and followed a multi-pronged approach to enhancing its role as an agro-dependent geography to one centered around sustainability, inclusivity and prosperity for all. The essential elements of this approach involved providing continued access of basic amenities such as toilets, drinking water and natural gas, to the rural populace thereby, ensuring a minimum living quality of life to the most vulnerable sections of society.

This was amply visible from Prime Minister's launch of the 'Swachh Bharat Mission' in 2014, one of the first nationwide rural-centric schemes by the government. Seven years down the line, the remarkable results are there for all of us to witness from 38 percent of toilet coverage pan-India in 2014, the country now has a hundred per cent coverage of toilets, with nearly 11 crore (110 Million) toilets being constructed-largely across rural India. As a result of this, over 6,00,000 villages have been declared Open-Defecation Free (ODF), leading to better health and sanitation for a large chunk of Indians.¹ Similarly, the launch of "Ujjwala Yojana" five years ago was primarily targeted at providing energy security and a dignified life with better health for rural women by providing them over eight crore (80 million) free gas cylinders since 2016.²



Crucial amongst the other essentialities of life is having one's own home. India's rural areas have long been associated with widespread homelessness and kuccha (thatched), poorly built houses, which further aggravate poverty in villages. Realising the significance of affordable and reliable housing for all in ensuring equitable development in rural India, the government launched in 2016, the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin (PMAY-G) to provide all-weather homes to the poorest strata of society. Till date, over 1.5 crore houses have been built in rural areas, reducing homelessness and acute poverty for a majorly rural populace.³

Complementary to efforts for uplifting rural India was the implementation of the world's largest health assurance scheme by the Indian government, named "Ayushman Bharat Yojana," which currently has treated nearly two crore beneficiaries⁴, mostly coming from lower-income backgrounds and excluded from the healthcare system owing to their financial constraints.

Apart from ensuring a minimum standard of life for rural people through welfare schemes and a wider social security net, strengthening the economic fundamentals of rural India is the other half; which is critical to guaranteeing sustainable and dignified livelihoods for all. To this end, the government has made tremendous strides in

making India's rural and village economies more lucrative, diverse and better aligned to fulfilling India's larger economic goals.

Prominent among these are the massive electrification programs which led to each village of India getting electrified in 2015 complemented by the "Ujala Yojana" under which over 36 crore (360 million) LED bulbs⁵ have been distributed in a bid to take India's villages out of the bane of darkness that hampered their progress for so long. Another milestone effort to boost economic activity and higher mobility has been the astonishing pace of rural roads being constructed in the past seven years- over 2.25 lakh kilometers of them connecting 97 per cent of India's villages with the rest of the country.⁶

With agriculture and allied activities forming the major contributor to rural economics, boosting farm incomes, promoting better soil health and diversifying the agricultural palette of the rural areas, all become pertinent to not just higher rural economic growth but also to fulfill India's numerous health, environment and food security commitments globally. These are the precise domains where the launch and implementation of initiatives such as Jan Dhan-Aadhaar-Mobile (JAM Trinity), Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT), Soil Health Cards (SHCs), e-National Agricultural Market (e-NAM), PM-Kisan Samman Nidhi Yojana (PM-KISAN), PM Fasal Bima Yojana and PM Krishi Sinchayee Yojana, have all led to a near-transformation of agricultural activity in rural areas by making it farmer-centric rather than crop-centric.

In doing so, the role of digital media cannot and must not be understated. The wonderful compatibility of JAM trinity and DBT together is responsible for plugging monetary leakages in public funds amounting to billions of dollars each year, leading to better outcomes for all and greater allocation of public resources. Moreover, the introduction of optical fibre connectivity through the BharatNet program which has seen almost 1.6 lakh Gram Panchayats (Rural Councils) of the country getting digitally connected, has been instrumental in driving consumption and demand from rural geographies in recent years.

This has been complemented by record low rates of mobile data and calls in India leading to even higher participation of rural areas in the broader economic and social activity. On the back of an ever-growing network of Common Service

Centres (CSCs), governmental service delivery nodal points, rural efficiency and engagements have grown rapidly.

While for the longest time, we have equated our villages with agriculture, the recent decades have witnessed a sustained push towards diversifying rural economy away from its over-dependence on agriculture, towards more value-sensitive and employment generating activities such as industries, off-farm activities, entrepreneurship, micro financing and handloom/heritage-based local industries. The government has converged much of its policy targets to aggressively promote grass roots entrepreneurship and innovation through schemes like Mudra Yojana, Van Dhan Yojana, One District One Product (ODOP), Skill India, Kaushal Vikas Yojana and Standup India. With higher productivity, young demography, and a skilled workforce, the growth potential of rural economic activity is immense and waiting to be tapped.

All the above-mentioned initiatives points to a serious commitment and outcome-oriented approach on the union government's part towards long-term growth of rural India in the 'New India' growth story. For far too long has rural India remained a mere spectator, much less a beneficiary, of the economic transformation seen across our urban centres.

The government has time and again, shown that no meaningful economic or social progress can take place in India without its villages and thus, it is high time, rural India becomes an active participant, even the driver, of India's rise in the years to come. Rural India, for its part, couldn't agree more.

Footnote

1. <https://transformingindia.mygov.in/performance-dashboard/#primary>
2. <https://transformingindia.mygov.in/performance-dashboard/#primary>
3. <https://transformingindia.mygov.in/performance-dashboard/#primary>
4. <https://transformingindia.mygov.in/performance-dashboard/#primary>
5. <https://transformingindia.mygov.in/performance-dashboard/#primary>
6. <https://transformingindia.mygov.in/performance-dashboard/#primary>

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