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### NEED FOR RURAL INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT


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Rural infrastructure in India assumes added importance in the current context when the country's economic growth rate is moving to a higher growth trajectory, triggering off high expectations among its populace for a better and different standard of living from the normally dreary and staid ones they have been inured to.

With the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) governments both in its earlier five-year tenure and the current one beginning in 2009 putting the accent on inclusive economic development and samadhi as its core concern, the issue of beefing up the infrastructure both in the urban and rural areas has popped up, engaging the attention of policy-makers, experts and administrators alike. No doubt, infrastructure consists of both physical and social components with the latter such as basic education, primary health and a pollution-free ambience always

taking precedence over the physical infrastructure. But the social infrastructure can never be securely built or promoted if the physical infrastructure such as sound roads, sanitation, employment for people eking out existence on the margins and habitations remain abysmally at a low level.

Against this backdrop, the significance of rural infrastructure could scarcely be undermined, given the reality too that more than 70 per cent of over billion population of India reside in its multitude of villages dotting across the country. Recognising the crucial and key importance of rural development in the overall scheme of the country's economic development, the Central government has of late attached substantial weight and volume on the Ministry of Rural Development by equipping it with the requisite funds and functionaries. The mission and objectives of the Ministry is to



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correct the developmental aberrations and to accord high priority to development in rural and remote areas by bringing in sustainable and holistic development through a well-crafted strategy. Even as the thrust remains all-round economic and social transformation in rural areas, the focus continues to be one of bridging the rural-urban divide, guaranteeing wage employment and ensuring food security, rendering rural people the arbiter of their own destiny, creating rural infrastructure for better economic opportunities and growth and restoring lost or depleted productivity of the land.

**Bharat Nirman**

In order to build rural infrastructure on an enduring footing, the UPA government fashioned the Bharat Nirman scheme in its previous tenure with a view to ensuring inclusive growth by improving rural infrastructure in a comprehensive manner. In its second phase of implementation of Bharat Nirman (2009-14), efforts are afoot to provide electricity, safe drinking water, all weather roads, telephones and broadband connectivity to all eligible villages/habitations and substantially step up rural housing stock and irrigation potential. It may be recalled that as many as 71.8 lakh houses were constructed during the Bharat Nirman first phase against a target of 60 lakhs. An ambitious target of constructing 120 lakh houses has been set for the second phase. Against this, more than 31 lakh dwelling units have already been constructed/ upgraded at a cost of around Rs 11,000 crore.

Secondly, over 35,000 habitations have been connected with all-weather roads and over 1.90 lakh kms existing rural roads have been upgraded/ renewed since Bharat Nirman was launched in 2004. In 2009-10, 3344 habitations were connected and around 35,500 kms of road length upgraded/ renewed. On the supply of safe and potable drinking water to villages, the emphasis during the first phase was on providing safe drinking water to over 3.5 lakh habitations. With this work more or less over, the priority has now shifted to cover water quality affected habitations. Hence as many as 28,672 habitations affected with chemical contaminations have been provided with safe drinking water under the ongoing programmes. Whereas during the first phase, 73.1 lakh hectares of additional irrigation potential was

created, additional irrigation potential of 7.11 lakh hectares has been created subsequently.

Thirdly, in a bid to improve access to electricity by rural people, using the Rajiv Gandhi Gramin Vidyunakaran Yojana (RGVY) scheme, 18,734 rural villages have been electrified, against the target of 17,500 unelectrified villages. Besides, against a target of 47 lakh below the poverty line (BPL) household connections, 47.18 lakh BPL households have been given free electricity connections. Also, under Bharat Nirman, villages not having access to public telephones were to be provided with Village Public Telephone (VPTs). Thus 5, 69,389 villages out of a total of 5, 93,601 villages have been provided with VPTs as on end-March 2011. Besides, out of 2.50 lakh targeted village panchayats, about a third have been connected through broadband. This is the long and short of the progress scored under the ambitious Bharat Nirman programme that is all set to transform the country's rural landscape by bringing in the much-needed improvement in the quality of life to legions of villagers.

**Panchayat Role**

Alongside, the Backward Regions Grant Fund (BRGF) programme is being implemented through panchayats in 250 identified districts which aims at removing regional imbalances by bridging critical gaps in development and encouraging decentralised planning. A major milestone has been preparation of decentralised plans by the local bodies in 246 districts which has met the felt local needs. BRGF comprises two funding windows one Capacity Building Fund of Rs 250 crore and second a substantially untied grants of Rs 3500 crore totalling Rs 3750 crore in a year in 250 BRGF districts in 27 States (except for Goa) for supplementing financial resources and converging existing developmental inflow in identified districts for addressing regional imbalances in development.

BRGF insists on integrated, decentralised and participatory plans consolidated by District Planning Committees (DPCs) with the funding pattern being 25% for Anganwadis, 16% for schools, class rooms, compound, 14% for drinking water and 10 per cent Gram Panchayat buildings. The development grant of BRGF is largely untied in nature and the panchayat raj institutions would largely decide the

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actual projects to be taken up. The BRGF scheme is being implemented since 2005-06. While the budget estimate for 2009-10 was Rs 4670 crore, this has subsequently been reduced to Rs 3670 crore in the revised estimate. However, the budget estimate for the current fiscal is enhanced to Rs 5050 crore with the Ministry now proposing to allocate the enhanced outlays to the most extremist affected districts in the aftermath of left-wing extremism that was manifest in backward regions across the eastern and central India.

There is also in existence a scheme christened the Rural Business Hub (RBH), applicable to 250 BRGF districts and all districts of North-East region. Piloted and operated by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, the scheme basically aims at promoting rural non-farming enterprise by availing of local skills and resources and thereby redounding to rural development in a meaningful and purposeful fashion. The scheme works on UP (Public-Private-Panchayat-Partnership) model and setting up of RBHs is primarily accomplished through convergence of resources from various ongoing schemes. Assistance under the RBH scheme is available for professional support services, training/skill development and four purchase of minor equipment, ideally suited for agriculture/horticulture/handloom/handcrafts related activities with production being decentralised, the RBH scheme has been in vogue since September 2007.

Be that as it may, a House panel report, tabled in Parliament in the budget session, on the demands for grants of the Ministry of Panchayati Raj observed with dismay that the financial achievement of RBH scheme during 2009-10 was only 32.78 per cent, whereas in the previous fiscal it was 96 per cent. It further noted that though 219 memoranda of understanding have been signed across 20 States during 2009-10, no details on the functioning of any of the Rural Business Hubs could be ascertained. It feared that the slow progress made in the implementation of RBH might result in delaying the technical support and marketing linkages that are much needed for providing and promoting rural areas and rural enterprises. Experts and development economists alike share the concerns of the House panel and genuinely hope that the authorities charged with implementing the RBH scheme do their

proper homework so that the best intentions behind the laudable scheme are not laid waste and the really needy rural people get the much-deserved outlet for unleashing their entrepreneurial elan in the larger interest of integrating their backward regions into the mainstream markets.

#### Employment

Finally, any study of rural infrastructure would not be complete if a due reference to the rural employment aspect is not made. Foremost among the plethora of employment schemes currently in force in rural India is the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGA). Since its inception in 2006, the scheme has provided nearly 600 crore person-days of work at a total expenditure of around Rs 70,000 crore. During 2009-10, about 4.90 crore households have been provided job through 40.98 lakh works with 251 crore person-days of employment being generated at a total expenditure of Rs 33,087 crore. The average wage rate per day has increased from Rs 65 in 2006-07 to Rs 90 in 2009-10. Wages are being paid to the beneficiaries under MGNREGA through post office and savings bank accounts. As of February 2010, more than nine crore savings bank and post office accounts have been opened across the country for provision of wages under the scheme. Though the scheme has elicited mixed reaction, criticisms centred on lack of audits and measures are being put in place to get the gram panchayats arrange for such dispassionate audit so that any loopholes in the scheme could be plugged in the interests of the beneficiaries. There is also the Prime Minister's Gram Sadak Yojana, born out of the merger of the earlier Rural Employment Generation Programme (REGP) and the Pradhan Mantri Rojar Yojana (PMRY) in providing the much-needed off-farm occupations to rural people.

With warts and all, the existing schemes for rural India, if implemented in earnest and by proper monitoring body to eliminate lapses, would definitely bolster the rural infrastructure tremendously and provide the succour to the teeming rural people by making a little difference to their otherwise hard and unpleasant living.

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