

Rural Connectivity Programme

The availability and the quality of rural infrastructure constitute an excellent measure of the development of a nation. Connectivity is considered the most important prerequisite for human sustenance. Connectivity includes communication networks through telephony, Internet and postal services, electric connections, health infrastructure, educational infrastructure and transport facilities through road networks. Road connectivity is the most fundamental and sought-after connectivity, particularly in rural areas, due to its flexibility and its affordability within the community. In this unit we will outline the scope of rural connectivity, the importance of rural roads in social, economic and cultural life and the features of the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY)

Construction of Rural Roads is not a new phenomenon in India. Earlier, Rural Roads were seen as the means for revenue officials to reach the people for collecting land revenue, rather than as a means for the benefit of the community. However, the construction of village roads was included under the Minimum Needs Programme (MNP) for the first time in the 5th Five Year Plan (1974-79), which envisaged providing connectivity to population groups of 1500 persons or more with All-Weather Roads. A definite outlay for this programme was made in each year of the Fifth Plan, though it decreased in the subsequent Five Year Plans. Further, the Government of India initiated a number of programmes such as the National Rural Employment Programme (NREP), the Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme (RLEGP), the Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY), the Innovative Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (IJRY), the Basic Minimum Services (BMS), the Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS) and other similar schemes under which Rural Roads were constructed year after year and plan after plan. Notable work has also been done under the Rural Infrastructure Development Fund (RIDF) Scheme by the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) in the recent years.

The Government of India's resolve to provide total rural connectivity eventually culminated in the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) with the target of connecting every rural habitation that has a population of more than 1000 by the year 2003 and every rural habitation with a population of more than 500 by the year 2007. As for the Hill States (North-East, Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Uttaranchal), the Desert Areas and the Tribal Areas, the objective is to connect habitations with a population of 250 persons and above by the year 2007.

The spirit and the objective of the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana is to provide good all-weather road connectivity to the unconnected habitations. The population, as recorded in the Census 2001, is the basis for determining the population size of habitations.

The PMGSY was formally launched on the 25th of December in 2000 and commenced with the Financial Year 2000-01 with a budget of Rs. 2500 crores provided to the Ministry of Rural Development for that year.

The unit for this Programme is a Habitation and not a Revenue village or a Panchayat. About 1,70,000 unconnected habitations need to be covered under the PMGSY, which is a formidable task. This includes approximately 60,000 unconnected habitations with populations of over 1000; 81,000 with populations between 500-999; and 29,000 habitations with populations of 250-499 persons. Although there are many hilly areas in different non-hilly states, such areas do not receive any special treatment and the present target is to cover only the habitations with populations of over 500 persons by the year 2007.

The list of road works to be taken up under the PMGSY is finalised each year by the District Panchayat (Local Self Government at the district level) in accordance with the allocation of funds communicated to the district by the State Government. District Panchayats finalise the list through a consultative process involving lower level Panchayat institutions and elected representatives.

It is the responsibility of the State Government/District Panchayat to oversee that land is available for taking up the proposed road works. The PMGSY does not provide funds for land acquisition. However, the State Governments draw up policies in order to make the needed land (including forest land if necessary) available. Care is taken that the process of acquiring land for road works serves the common good and is also just and equitable.

In selecting road works, only the rural roads forming part of the Core Network are to be considered and the following order of priority has to be followed:

- 1) Precedence is given to New Connectivity, with priority to connecting habitations of higher population.
- 2) Upgrading Through Routes.
- 3) Upgrading Link Routes

Upgrading activities are proposed in a district, only if no New Connectivity remains to be taken up in that district.

The only exception to the above order of priority is in respect of those routes that include the Village Panchayat Headquarters, market centres, educational or medical (essential) services or those places which are notified as places of tourist interest. In such cases, provision of New Connectivity may be made irrespective of the population size.