

Prime Minister's Speech

Shri Raghuvansh Prasad Singhji  
Suryakanta Patilji  
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am happy to have this opportunity to interact with the Project Directors of District Rural Development Agencies. I compliment the Ministry of Rural Development for organizing such consultations on a regular basis.

Our government is committed to the objective of inclusive growth. We have been engaged in refining programmes that seek to address this objective. We now have programmes with adequate resources to bridge the gaps in rural infrastructure through Bharat Nirman and to end the knowledge divide through the Sarva Siksha Abhiyan. We have an effective incentive-structure for primary education through the expanded Mid-day Meal programme. We are providing nutrition cover through an expanded Integrated Child Development Services programme. We have an ambitious programme to strengthen rural public health infrastructure and services through the National Rural Health Mission.

Together these programmes bring resources to the extent of nearly Rs.100 crores per district per annum, to many backward districts. In addition, we have started the Backward District Grant Fund covering 250 districts. This will, for the first time, realize the goal that Rajiv Gandhi set for us for effective decentralized planning. "Untied Funds" at the district level will be made available for meeting critical gaps identified at the district level in major national development programmes and build capacities of local and district-level institutions.

All these new opportunities reinforce the need to strengthen the planning system at the district level. We need to commit greater professional resources at the district level. I would like your forum to put forward suggestions for strengthening the planning capacity at the district level.

Bharat Nirman is an ambitious time-bound programme of our government for rural infrastructure. Three out of six components of Bharat Nirman of rural roads, rural housing and rural water supply fall directly under the purview of the Ministry of Rural Development.

I congratulate my valued colleague, Shri Raghuvansh Prasadji, and his team for ensuring that we are well on our way to achieving these targets in these three components. I request the Project Directors to review this at the district level and ensure that the targets that we have promised are met in their entirety.

As for rural roads - there are 7 states, namely, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chattisgarh which together account for over 90% of the backlog. In rural housing, against an overall shortage in housing stock of about 148 lakhs, we are providing 60 lakh houses. We have made a commitment that by 2009 all uncovered habitations will be covered under the rural water supply component.

On all these three components of Bharat Nirman, we look for time-bound action by state governments.

I am happy to note that the rural sanitation programme is now gaining momentum and is being personally championed by the Minister of Rural Development. Health standards of our people cannot improve if we do not invest in sanitation. Here we need appropriate strategies and not just more financial resources.

Under the National Rural Health Mission, a community Health activist called ASHA is being placed in every village. I suggest that the rural sanitation programme

makes effective use of this person as a change agent for creating hygiene consciousness.

The programme for self-employment, the Swarnajayanti Gram Swarajgar Yojana (SGSY) has shown good results in several states. It has been instrumental in mobilizing a vast number of Self Help Groups for economic activity. Creation of such collectives can be a useful instrument for Project Directors at the district level to conceive channelising of development interventions through these groups.

I am happy to note that the National Rural Employment Guarantee programme has been widely welcomed by the rural public as well as the state governments. Nearly 88 lakh people are working in over 2,42,000 development works. The strength of this programme is that it provides an effective safety net to the poorest.

It is not surprising that the performance under the programme has not been uniform across states. The slow response in some states may be partly on account of low demand but in many states it may also be on account of delays in putting effective administrative arrangements in place. We look upon this programme to create durable assets and strengthen panchayati raj institutions, since at least 50% of works will be routed through them.

I am happy to learn that over 1,58,000 works are in the area of water conservation. This is a huge opportunity opened up by the National Employment Guarantee Act. Community level water security can be created through sustained action under the NREGA if this pace is kept up. The issue of technical competence in executing such works is important and this must engage our special attention.

NREGA opens up the opportunity to improve agricultural productivity in dryland areas. It is heartening that the dryland states have used NREGA funds to the maximum. Improvement of small farms through construction of wells, field bunds, land leveling, etc can increase productive capacity of drylands especially at a time when the production from well-endowed areas is plateauing.

NREGA is a programme for societal transformation. It needs effective watchdogs from society. Panchayats and civil society organizations should be seen as complementary—while panchayats deepen the democratic space, civil society organizations broaden it. NGOs and citizens' groups should use instruments like the Right to Information Act to increase accountability and transparency under the NREGA.

Project Directors must go beyond the programmes directly implemented by the Ministry of Rural Development and map human resources and skills in each district. This Ministry is singularly well-placed to develop District-level Rural Employment Reports capturing the wage employment created under NREGA, SGSY, SGRY as well as other development interventions in the district on an annual basis as a public document.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our next big growth story could be rural India. There is a conjuncture of circumstances, including the high growth rate of our economy, which holds great potential for rural India. We need relevant policy intervention to sustain this process. This is a national priority for us. We must bridge the developmental gap between urban and rural areas. We need to collectively ensure that rural India participates actively in the new growth process. In this national endeavour you have a vital and positive role to play. I urge you to play this role with dedication, enthusiasm and creativity. You can make a difference. I hope you will make that difference. May your path be blessed.

Thank you,