

RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL PROGRESS: FROM PARTICIPATION TO PARTNERSHIP

India's pursuit of inclusive growth under the development model of 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Prayas, Sabka Vishwas' has yielded measurable gains in recent years, reflected in sustained poverty reduction, narrowing inequalities, and improved access to basic services. Rural transformation has played a central role in this progress, driven by infrastructure investments, reforms in employment frameworks, the adoption of technology, and enhanced participation of local governments, and community institutions.

Inclusive development in India emphasises fairness, dignity, and equal rights for all, with the empowerment of vulnerable and marginalised groups at its core. Government affirmative action in education, healthcare, skill development, and livelihoods has facilitated social and economic mobility for the most vulnerable. Importantly, the development narrative is shifting from government-led schemes to community-driven initiatives, enabling local voices to shape solutions, and making growth more participatory, meaningful, and sustainable.

INTRODUCTION

13.1. Social mobility and equal opportunity are key to thriving societies and economies. Nonetheless, these have been challenging goals to meet. Equality of opportunities ensures greater social mobility by providing an equal and merit-driven framework for personal progress.

13.2. Social mobility can be understood as inter-generational mobility and also as intra-generational mobility, i.e. changes in a person's social or economic status during their own lifetime. Factors such as health, education (including access, quality, and equity, as well as lifelong learning), technology, work (opportunities, wages, and working conditions), and protection and institutions (social protection and inclusive institutions) are considered key determinants of social mobility across both dimensions. Low social mobility entrenches historical inequalities, and higher income inequalities fuel lower social mobility. Enhancing social mobility can transform this vicious cycle into a virtuous one, yielding positive benefits for broader economic growth.

13.3. Recognising the importance of enhancing social mobility to break cycles of

inequality, the government has implemented targeted initiatives across education, health, and social protection. In educational efforts, the focus is on ensuring the availability, quality, and equitable distribution of educational programmes, particularly to those who need them most. In health, measures include public investment to provide affordable preventive and curative care, nutrition, and health insurance. These measures have been discussed in detail in Chapter 11 of the Economic Survey. Government measures also focus on inclusion and accessibility for persons with disabilities, including targeted economic and entrepreneurial support, digital and technological empowerment, and the development of social justice and legal frameworks. These steps are designed to reduce structural barriers, empower marginalised groups, and create pathways for all citizens to improve their socio-economic status.

13.4. The focus of the government is also on making available and financing, where required, skills development, especially in the present context of technology-driven disruption to jobs and skills. As digitalisation and the use of AI (artificial intelligence) continue to reshape work, workers and employers are entering into more flexible work relationships. This has taken the form of a flourishing gig economy. There is a need to support those engaged in the economy through specific social protection measures. These are discussed in Chapter 12 of the Economic Survey.

13.5. Against this background, this chapter examines the country's progress across key social indicators. The first section reviews achievements in reducing poverty and inequality. The second section examines trends in government social sector expenditure. The third section focuses on recent developments in the rural economy, highlighting the contributions of communities, the integration of technology, and capacity building to economic growth. The final section examines how social justice initiatives promote ongoing inclusion as India progresses on its development path.

LIFTING MILLIONS UP: PROGRESS ON POVERTY AND INEQUALITY

13.6. Poverty and inequality are important issues for any developing country. The state endeavours to ensure equality of opportunities, eliminate absolute poverty, and prevent inequality from rising. It aspires for and works towards the goal that everyone in society has a fair chance to fulfil their potential, regardless of their socio-economic background, the origin of their parents, or geographical location. Policies such as income support, social protection, labour market regulation, and education for all help the state in its endeavour to ensure the goals of upward social mobility across generations and throughout an individual's lifespan. For example, enhancing access to educational opportunities throughout a person's life is a crucial factor that acts as a powerful 'equaliser' of chances to improve one's life.

13.7. These aspirations and policy efforts are commonly assessed using benchmarks of poverty and deprivation. One such metric is the World Bank's (WB) International Poverty Line (IPL), which represents the minimum amount of money a person needs per day to afford basic necessities such as food, clothing, and shelter. In June 2025, the WB raised the poverty line from USD 2.15 to USD 3.00 a day, adjusted for the purchasing power of money to 2021 prices.¹

13.8. With the revised IPL, the poverty rates for India in 2022-23 are 5.3 per cent for extreme poverty and 23.9 per cent for lower-middle-income poverty.² According to the WB, India has made significant strides in reducing non-monetary poverty. The WB Multidimensional Poverty Measure for India stood at 15.5 per cent in 2022-23, reflecting ongoing improvements in living conditions.³ These estimates corroborate the estimates of the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) as measured by NITI Aayog.⁴ The index measures non-monetary poverty by considering factors such as education, health, and living conditions. It shows a decline from 55.3 per cent in 2005-06⁵ to 14.96 per cent by 2019-21⁶, and is estimated to have decreased further to 11.28 per cent in 2022-23.

13.9. Alongside the WB poverty estimates, poverty estimates by researchers based on the Tendulkar committee poverty line also indicate a sharp and broad-based decline in poverty in India. Between 2011-12 and 2023-24, sustained economic growth, supported by redistributive interventions, is estimated to have reduced the poverty rate from 21.9 per cent in 2011-12 to 4.7 per cent in 2022-23 and further to 2.3 per cent in 2023-24.⁷ The estimates indicate low poverty incidence across states and in both rural and urban areas. These achievements demonstrate the government's commitment to inclusive development by targeting both rural and urban communities through welfare programmes, economic reforms, and enhanced access to services, thereby significantly reducing poverty.

¹ The IPL reflects updated information from new surveys in various countries, including the Household Consumer Expenditure Surveys for India. It uses improved methods for estimating poverty in countries with limited data, and a revised approach to categorising countries. <https://tinyurl.com/ys8ntsjd>

² WB India Poverty and Equity Brief: October 2025 (<https://tinyurl.com/2f6ytkmf>). The poverty estimates are based on the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES) data collected for August 2022 to July 2023.

³ The World Bank's Multidimensional Poverty Measure is adapted from the OPHI MPI. It includes extreme poverty but excludes deprivation in nutrition and health. OPHI MPI captures the acute deprivations in health, education, and living standards that a person faces simultaneously.

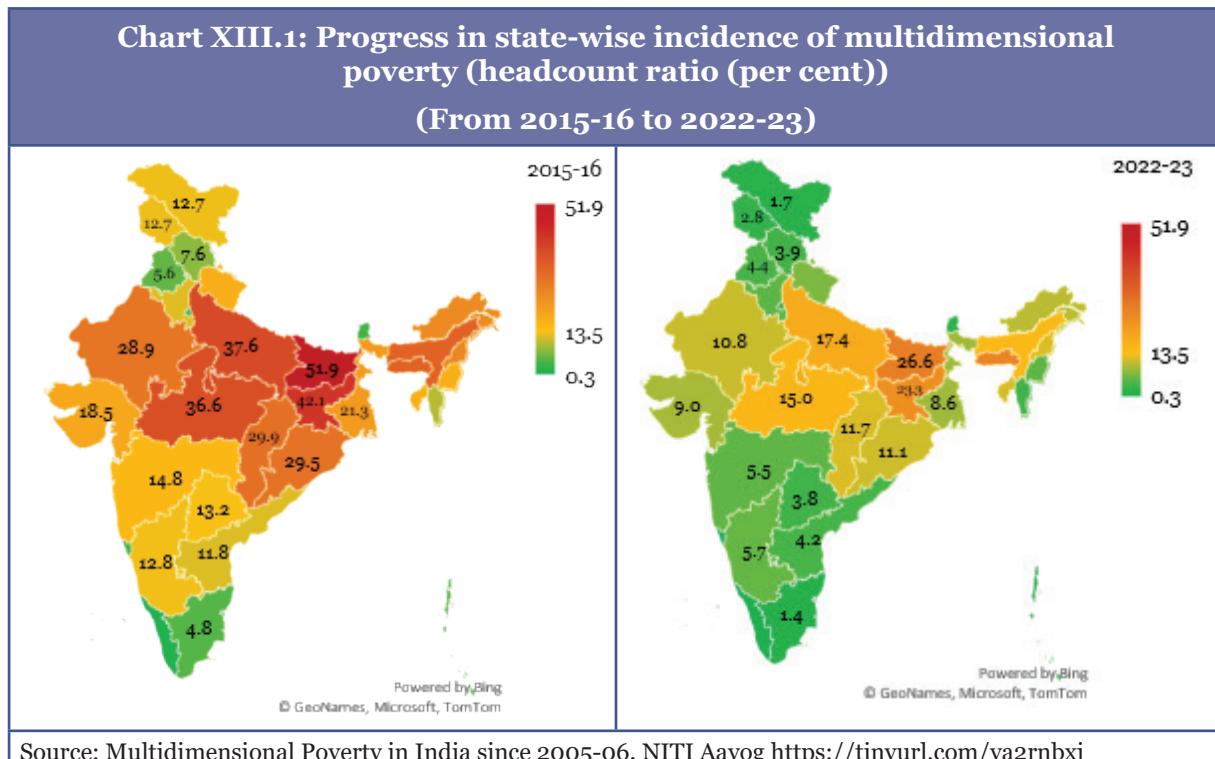
⁴ Multidimensional Poverty in India Since 2005-06. <https://tinyurl.com/ya2rnbxj>

⁵ National Family Health Survey (NFHS) round 3 (2005-06)

⁶ NFHS round 5 (2019-21)

⁷ Panagariya, A., & More, V. (2025). Mapping poverty across social, religious, and economic groups in India. Economic and Political Weekly, 60(48) <https://tinyurl.com/44r76e6s>

13.10. Alongside the ongoing efforts of the government of India, the state governments have also adopted innovative models and interventions to eradicate poverty and to attain inclusive development. As Chart XIII.1 displays, those states with higher poverty incidence in 2015-16, in terms of MPI, have witnessed a greater reduction in the headcount ratio of poverty⁸ over the years, indicating that multidimensional poverty differentials across various states have declined over time.⁹



13.11. State governments have introduced innovative programmes to tackle poverty over the years. One such example is the Bihar government's 'Satat Jeevikoparjan Yojana (SJY)', a livelihoods scheme targeting ultra-poor women launched in 2018. The programme uses the 'Graduation approach' to support targeted households with asset transfers, capacity-building training, livelihood gap assistance, and mentoring for a period of 24 months, thereby ensuring long-term self-reliance.¹⁰ Beneficiaries were also provided access to insurance, public entitlements, and relief support during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.¹¹

13.12. Another example is the Kerala poverty eradication model. The Kerala government implemented a comprehensive method to identify the most vulnerable

⁸ The Headcount ratio in the MPI shows the percentage of a population that is multidimensionally poor.

⁹ Ibid note 4 above

¹⁰ The 'Graduation approach' is an evidence-informed anti-poverty programme that combines asset transfers, training, financial support, coaching, and health services to address multiple constraints simultaneously.

¹¹ Satat Jeevikoparjan Yojana: <https://tinyurl.com/3xzuuk9d>

households through extensive community participation, led by local governments and supported by frontline workers, including ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist), Anganwadi workers, Kudumbashree, and activist groups. Essential documents such as Aadhar, ration cards, Unique Disability ID (UDID) cards for the differently-abled, and electoral IDs, along with emergency services like health insurance and social security pensions, were provided to families. The programme prioritised ensuring basic food and medical care. Individualised micro-plans were created for each family, with regular digital tracking and monitoring service delivery by local self-governments and departments. The Kudumbashree network played a key role as both community monitor and service provider, while local governments prioritised these interventions in their annual development plans.¹² The Union government, through the Ministry of Rural Development, has launched the ‘Samaveshi Aajeevika Yojana’ programme under the umbrella of Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana – National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM), as a comprehensive livelihoods programme designed to put rural women on the path to self-sufficiency, built on the ‘Graduation approach.’¹³

13.13. Both SJY and the Kerala model showcase the involvement of the community and a multipronged strategy with continuous support and monitoring to ‘push’ the vulnerable out of the vicious cycle through handholding support, training, access to finance, and basic necessities. These interventions enable households to become self-reliant and resilient even in times of crisis. A study by J-PAL found that SJY beneficiaries reported having a stable income source, even as other income opportunities, like casual labour, disappeared due to COVID-19.¹⁴

13.14. These state-level innovations reflect broader national priorities, where targeted social investment is being scaled up to support inclusive growth. Understanding trends in social sector expenditure offers insight into the government’s approach to enhancing well-being and expanding social protection nationwide.

Social sector expenditure trends

13.15. Inclusive growth based on the principle of ‘Sabka Sath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas, Sabka Prayas’ is the government’s model for economic development. The government’s efforts to provide affordable housing, social security for workers, food security, financial inclusion, universal access to basic amenities, and high-quality, affordable healthcare are instrumental in improving the overall well-being and standards of living. The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation’s (MoSPI) latest

¹² Kerala Extreme Poverty Alleviation Project (EPEP): <https://tinyurl.com/4ssapa3y>

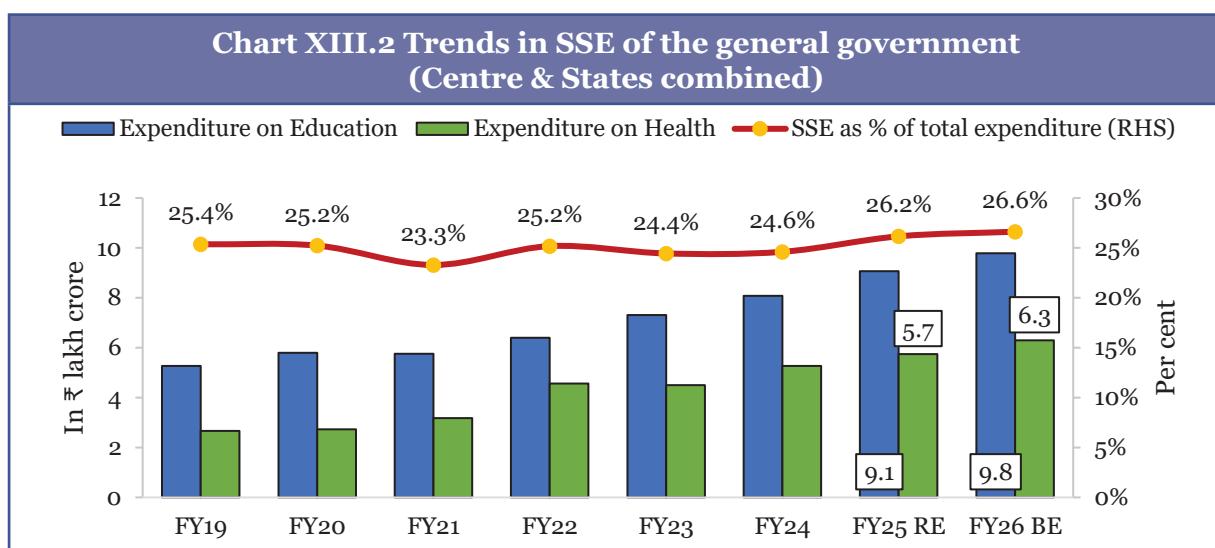
¹³ Samaveshi Aajeevika Yojana: <https://tinyurl.com/352xb8wk>

¹⁴ The Graduation Approach during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Building Resilience among Ultra-poor Households in Bihar <https://tinyurl.com/bdyhc44x>

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) National Indicator Framework (NIF) Progress Report, 2025, provides a comprehensive picture of the impact of these initiatives in achieving a transformative scale-up towards achieving the SDG targets.¹⁵

13.16. According to the report, the population covered by social protection systems has increased from 22 per cent in 2016 to 64.3 per cent in 2025, indicating a substantial expansion in social security coverage in the country. The population using improved drinking water sources in rural areas has increased from 94.6 per cent in 2015-16 to 99.6 per cent in 2024-25. Universal household electrification was achieved in 2021-22, while 100 per cent of the districts were declared open defecation free (ODF) in 2019-20, and over 96 per cent of Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) villages have achieved the ODF plus status (As of 31 December 2025).¹⁶

13.17. Realising the importance of the inclusive developmental goal, the general government's social services expenditure (SSE) has kept pace with the development of the social sector.¹⁷ The general government's SSE has shown a rising trend since FY22. During the five years from FY22 to FY26 (BE), the SSE grew at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 12 per cent. Expenditure on education¹⁸ has grown at a CAGR of 11 per cent, whereas expenditure on health¹⁹ grew at a CAGR of 8 per cent during the same period.



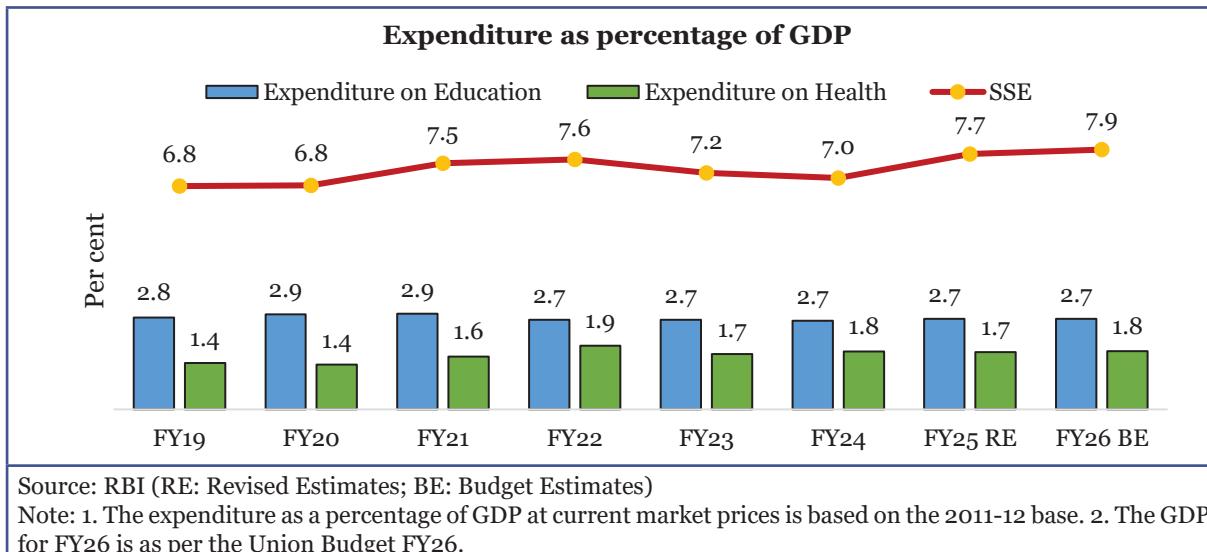
¹⁵ SDG National Indicator Framework (NIF) Progress Report, 2025: <https://tinyurl.com/9tcb5p4p>

¹⁶ SBM Grameen Dashboard: <https://tinyurl.com/mrxpjpx>

¹⁷ Social services include education, sports, art and culture; medical and public health, family welfare; water supply and sanitation; housing; urban development; welfare of SCs, STs and OBCs, labour and labour welfare; social security and welfare, nutrition, relief on account of natural calamities, etc.

¹⁸ Expenditure on 'Education' pertains to expenditure on Education, Sports, Arts and Culture.

¹⁹ Expenditure on 'Health' includes expenditure on 'Medical and Public Health', 'Family Welfare' and 'Water Supply and Sanitation'.



TRANSFORMING THE RURAL ECONOMY

13.18. Rural development stands at the core of India's journey towards inclusive economic growth, given that a substantial majority of the population continues to reside in rural areas. With 6.65 lakh villages and 2.68 lakh Gram Panchayats (GPs) and Rural Local Bodies, the rural landscape forms the backbone of the nation's social and economic development.²⁰ While government initiatives have prioritised infrastructure, credit access, basic amenities, and the development of agriculture and traditional industries to make the rural economy self-reliant and resilient, it is the third pillar, the community itself, that holds the key to sustainable transformation. Empowering rural communities and nurturing collective action are essential for inclusive development.

13.19. NABARD's latest Rural Economic Conditions and Sentiments Survey (RECSS) (November 2025) round findings show a broad-based strengthening of rural economic fundamentals, with robust consumption, high income growth, rising investment, improved formal credit access, lower inflation perceptions, better loan repayment conditions, and strong satisfaction with infrastructure, all supported by government welfare transfers and public investment.²¹

13.20. Furthermore, the findings of RECSS are complemented by a recent research report stating that rural consumption has risen to its highest level in 17 quarters.²² The report attributes this upturn to firm growth in real agricultural and non-agricultural

²⁰ PIB release dated 6 February 2025: <https://tinyurl.com/bddttat2>

²¹ NABARD RECSS Round 8 (November 2025): <https://tinyurl.com/4jdv4jwp> The survey captures quantitative and qualitative data, both backwards-looking (economic conditions) and forward-looking (household sentiments), on a limited set of key macro-financial parameters relating to the rural economy.

²² Piplani, R., & Ladha, T. (7 November 2025). Rural rules, urban follows. Motilal Oswal Financial Services Ltd. <https://tinyurl.com/36xfh7h9>

wages, higher sales of tractors and fertilisers, and robust farm credit, as well as healthy reservoir levels, lower input costs, and steady MSP (Minimum Support Price) procurement, all of which have supported sowing activity and farm incomes. These developments collectively indicate improving rural economic conditions.

13.21. These findings are complemented by a decline in dependence on the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) for employment in rural areas. While MGNREGS has long served as a critical safety net for rural households, recent trends reveal a notable decline in work demand under the scheme. Person days generated have declined significantly from a pandemic peak of 389.09 crore person days in FY21 to approximately 183.77 crore in FY26 (up to 31 December 2025), representing a decline of over 53 per cent.²³ This decline in MGNREGS demand coincides with a decrease in rural unemployment, from 3.3 per cent in 2020-21 to 2.5 per cent in 2023-24, suggesting that many rural households may be accessing non-farm or other non-MGNREGS work.²⁴

Reimagining rural employment in a changing rural economy

13.22. These developments highlight a marked improvement in the rural economy driven by strong macroeconomic fundamentals and a reduced dependence on MNREGS as a source of livelihood. At the same time, they underscore the need to re-examine the design and objectives of employment guarantee programmes in light of changing rural realities.

13.23. Rural employment has been a cornerstone of India's social protection framework for nearly two decades. Since its enactment in 2005, the MGNREGS has provided wage employment, stabilised rural incomes, and created basic infrastructure, offering at least 100 days of guaranteed unskilled work to rural households. Over time, increasing incomes, enhanced connectivity, widespread digital adoption, and diversified livelihoods have transformed the nature of rural employment requirements, emphasising both the programme's achievements and the need to reassess its design and aims.

13.24. Over the years, a range of administrative and technological reforms have enhanced the implementation of the scheme, resulting in notable improvements in participation, transparency, and digital governance. Women's participation rose steadily from 48 per cent to 58.1 per cent between FY14 and FY25, Aadhaar seeding expanded sharply, the Aadhaar-Based Payment System was widely adopted, and electronic wage payments became nearly universal. Monitoring of works also improved, with a large expansion in geo-tagged assets and a growing share of individual assets created at the household

²³ MNREGS dashboard: <https://nrega.nic.in/>

²⁴ Annual Periodic Labour Force Survey report 2023-24 (July-June period): <https://tinyurl.com/mt4w3ja4>

level. Field-level staff played a critical role in sustaining implementation despite limited resources.

13.25. However, alongside these gains, deeper structural issues persisted. Monitoring in several states revealed gaps, including work not being done on the ground, expenditure not matching physical progress, the use of machines in labour-intensive work, and frequent bypassing of digital attendance systems. Misappropriation accumulated over time, and only a small proportion of households completed the full 100 days of employment post-pandemic, indicating that while delivery systems improved, the overall architecture of MGNREGA has reached its limits and warrants reassessment in light of evolving rural realities.²⁵

13.26. Against this backdrop, the government has enacted the Viksit Bharat- Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) Act, 2025, also referred to as VB - G RAM G Act, 2025. The Act is a comprehensive statutory overhaul of MGNREGS, aligning rural employment with the long-term vision of Viksit Bharat 2047, while strengthening accountability, infrastructure outcomes and income security. The VB G-RAM G Act, 2025, represents a decisive shift in India's rural employment policy. While MGNREGS, achieved significant gains in participation, digitisation, and transparency over time, persistent structural weaknesses limited its effectiveness. The new Act builds on past improvements while addressing their shortcomings through a modern, accountable, and infrastructure-focused framework (Box XIII.1).

Box XIII.1: VB G-RAM G Bill 2025 - Reforming MGNREGA for Viksit Bharat

The Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) Act, 2025, is a comprehensive legislative reset that aims to modernise rural employment guarantees, strengthen accountability, and align employment creation with long-term infrastructure and climate resilience goals. The new Act represents a significant upgrade over MGNREGA, fixing structural weaknesses while enhancing employment, transparency, planning, and accountability.

Feature	MGNREGS	VB G RAM G
Days of employment	100 days of wage employment per rural household	Legal guarantee of 125 days of unskilled wage employment per rural household per financial year.
Focus of works	Multiple and scattered categories of works with limited strategic focus	Four clearly defined priority areas focusing on water security, rural infrastructure, livelihoods and works to mitigate extreme weather & disaster preparedness.

²⁵ The issue of leakages from MNREGS Funds was also discussed in Economic Survey 2023-24, Box VII.9, Chapter 7. <https://tinyurl.com/2f6snhd>

Unemployment Allowance	Payable if employment is not provided within the stipulated time; the Disentitlement clause existed	Payable if employment is not provided within the stipulated time, with clearer accountability; the disentitlement clauses removed, reinforcing rights-based entitlement.
Pause window	No explicit statutory 'pause window'	States are empowered to notify periods aggregating to 60 days during peak sowing and harvesting seasons when works shall not be undertaken, facilitating the availability of farm labour during peak agricultural operations.
Funding approach	Demand-based funding with unpredictable allocations	Demand-driven nature is intact. State-wise normative allocation determined on objective development parameters to ensure equity (samata), fairness (nyaysangata) and balanced regional development while addressing inter-state and intra-state disparities.
Local planning	GP planning is central.	Decentralised, participatory, bottom-up planning through Gram Sabha led Viksit GP plans, integrating convergence and infrastructure planning.

Wage and social protection measures

The Act specifies that wages will be disbursed on a weekly basis, or at the latest within a fortnight of work completion. This timely payment mechanism protects workers' rights and reduces delays that historically affected participation.

Administrative strengthening and capacity building

Recognising the critical role of field-level staff in ensuring MGNREGA's implementation despite limited resources, VB G-RAM G strengthens administrative capacity by increasing the administrative expenditure ceiling from 6 per cent to 9 per cent of total expenditure, supporting staffing, training, remuneration, and technical capabilities. This shift towards a professional, well-supported system is expected to improve planning, execution, and service delivery while reinforcing accountability at all levels.

Decentralised planning and local empowerment

Planning under VB G-RAM G is grounded in local realities through Viksit Gram Panchayat Plans, which are spatially integrated with national systems such as PM Gati Shakti. GPs

continue to play a central role, implementing at least half of the work in terms of cost, with institutionalised convergence of resources and programmes. This approach enhances participatory planning, ensuring that rural development interventions are tailored to the local context, sustainable, and responsive to community needs.

Asset creation and national development integration

All assets created under VB G-RAM G are aggregated into the Viksit Bharat National Rural Infrastructure Stack, ensuring a unified and coordinated development strategy. By linking local works to broader national priorities, the Act facilitates both immediate support for rural livelihoods and long-term strategic infrastructure outcomes.

Transparency, accountability, and monitoring

The Act enhances transparency and accountability across the system. The Centre is empowered to investigate complaints, suspend fund releases in cases of serious irregularities, and direct corrective measures as necessary. Digital governance is being strengthened through real-time monitoring, GPS-enabled tracking of works, MIS dashboards, and weekly public disclosures. Social audits are mandated at least every six months, and GPs will play a more prominent role in ensuring visibility and community participation. Central and State Steering Committees provide continuous guidance, oversight, and coordination, while digital tools, such as biometric authentication and AI-enabled monitoring, facilitate early detection of irregularities.

Financial sustainability

The Act's financial architecture ensures predictable funding while limiting undue burden on states. Normative funding allocations, coupled with cost-sharing mechanisms and additional support during disasters, provide a sustainable fiscal framework. Strong oversight and accountability mechanisms further reduce the risk of misappropriation, promoting efficient use of public resources.

By expanding guaranteed employment, prioritising high-impact works, strengthening administrative capacity, and embedding strong digital governance, VB GRAM G positions rural employment as a strategic instrument for sustainable development. It aligns local livelihoods with national priorities, strengthens institutional capacity at all levels, enhances accountability and transparency, and supports the creation of climate-resilient infrastructure.

Driving last-mile impact through community participation

13.27. India's extraordinary diversity, encompassing languages, cultures, castes, and geography, is not only a defining characteristic but also a profound strength, particularly in the context of rural development. Harnessing this diversity through community participation creates a powerful engine for inclusive growth and sustainable rural transformation. Over time, governance has evolved from centralised models (top-down) to more decentralised (bottom-up), people-centred frameworks. The

73rd Constitutional Amendment (1992) institutionalised Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) as vehicles for grassroots democracy and laid an institutional framework for communities to engage actively in planning and executing development initiatives.

13.28. National programmes, such as MGNREGS, DAY-NRLM, SBM, and Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM), have embedded participatory approaches, empowering communities to shape development through local bodies, self-help groups (SHGs), and grassroots organisations. Initiatives like Kerala's Kudumbashree, Maharashtra's Participatory Irrigation Management (PIM), and the Northeast's NERCORMP demonstrate how local involvement drives inclusive and sustainable outcomes.²⁶ This, in effect, is the concept of Jan Bhagidari, or public participation, which provides a practical blueprint for narrowing the disconnect between the state and its citizens while building inclusivity from the ground up. Jan Bhagidari is supported by an inclusive policy design, emphasising that every individual has the right and responsibility to contribute to economic and social progress. This engagement can be facilitated through technology-driven participation, strengthened community institutions that harness social capital, capacity building, skill development, rural infrastructure development, rural well-being initiatives, or participatory budgeting/planning.

Technology-driven participation

13.29. Technology serves as a powerful catalyst for inclusivity, breaking down barriers and broadening access for everyone. Innovations like advanced mobile phones, satellite internet, and digital tools for agriculture are helping to close the 'digital divide', bringing vital services to even the most remote areas. The recent Comprehensive Modular Survey: Telecom 2025 confirms the positive trend.²⁷

13.30. Schemes like Survey of Villages Abadi and Mapping with Improvised Technology in Village Areas (SVAMITVA) and Namo Drone Didi are potent examples of how technology can foster inclusivity in village life. SVAMITVA utilises drone technology to map rural properties and issue legal ownership cards, granting villagers clear property rights, reducing land disputes, and facilitating access to bank loans and government schemes, benefits that were previously out of reach. Namo Drone Didi, by training rural women to operate drones for agricultural and land mapping tasks, not only boosts local livelihoods and skills but also empowers women to participate in the digital economy.

13.31. As of December 2025, the drone survey under SVAMITVA has been completed in 3.28 lakh villages, against a target of nearly 3.44 lakh villages notified for drone

²⁶ North Eastern Regional Community Resource Management Programme for Upland Areas

²⁷ CAMS-Telecom 2025 was conducted as a part of the 80th Round of NSS Survey during January-March 2025
<https://tinyurl.com/ycke3t87>

survey. 2.76 crore property cards have been prepared for nearly 1.82 lakh villages.²⁸ Lead Fertiliser Companies distributed 1,094 drones to SHG Drone Didis in 2023-24 using their own resources, with 500 of these drones provided under the Namo Drone Didi Scheme.²⁹

13.32. Additionally, the government has been implementing the computerisation and digitisation of rural land records since FY08 through the Digital India Land Records Modernisation Programme (DILRMP), and substantial progress has been made over the years. The goal is to maintain good-quality land records, which will, in turn, improve the quality of life for citizens. At the all-India level, digitisation of Record of Rights (RoRs) in rural areas has been completed to the extent of 99.8 per cent of available land records. Registration of land and property has also been computerised under DILRMP to the extent of 95.73 per cent of Sub Registration Offices (SROs). Unique Land Parcel Identification Number (ULPIN)/Bhu-Aadhaar has been assigned to 36.67 crore land parcels to date.

13.33. Building on technology-enabled schemes, villages can be converted into smart, intelligent villages, shifting from programme-based interventions to an integrated, village-based approach. Technologies can be leveraged holistically to support rural development, enhancing the quality of life, strengthening local economies, and empowering communities. For example, in Satnavari Smart Village, Maharashtra, farmers receive AI-powered alerts on soil, crops, and weather conditions. Smart irrigation operates on solar energy with predictive insights, while shared community drone spraying of fertilisers and dashboards ensure transparent governance. Students can learn via AI-driven modules and digital labs, and villagers can access instant telemedicine and e-health records.³⁰

13.34. The Rural Technology Action Group (RuTAGE) Smart Village Centre (RSVC), inaugurated in Mandaura village, Sonipat, establishes a permanent hub at the Panchayat level to support 15-20 villages with 12 technology tracks, including internet-of-things (IoT) for water monitoring, satellite agri-data, solar power, waste management, FinTech apps and custom solutions like animal intrusion prevention and electronic medical record-keeping are based on local needs. It fosters community adoption through innovations, local entrepreneurs, and collaborations with Krishi Vikas Kendras and NRLM for scalable rural progress. This model aims to bridge the rural-urban divide by handholding grassroots tech deployment nationwide.³¹

13.35. Community participation and technology-enabled engagement can further

²⁸ PIB release of M/o Panchayati Raj dated 29 December 2025: <https://tinyurl.com/3edmdd7z>

²⁹ PIB release by M/o Agriculture & FW dated 1 August 2025 <https://tinyurl.com/nhzfcnp4>

³⁰ <https://villagesquare.in/satnavari-village-smarter-than-most-indian-cities/>

³¹ PIB release dated 15 February 2025: <https://tinyurl.com/5n8ne4c6>

enhance the governance of village commons, which remain a crucial yet underutilised asset where local institutions, digital tools, and livelihood generation intersect to support sustainable rural transformation.

Village Commons in India: Need for a fresh approach

13.36. Village commons in India, also known as Common Property Resources (CPR), are traditionally community-managed shared resources that include grazing fields, ponds, water bodies, and other areas collectively used by villagers for fodder, fuel, cane crushing, water, and livelihood. CPRs were first defined by the National Sample Survey Organisation in its 1998 survey, ‘Common Property Resources in India’ (54th Round, 1998-99), which indicated that approximately 15 per cent of India’s geographical area comprises village commons.³²

13.37. The 2011 Census estimates India’s common land to be approximately 6.6 crore hectares, which form biodiversity-rich ecosystems.³³ These ecosystems provide 34 different services that support the livelihoods of approximately 35 crore rural people by supplying them with food, fodder, fuelwood, timber, organic manure, and seeds, as well as non-material benefits such as clean air, water purification, soil retention, carbon sequestration, and flood control. Such ecosystems generate an economic dividend of USD 9.05 crore per year, while also making significant contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including the reduction of poverty (SDG 1), achieving sustainable livelihoods (SDG 8), and promoting environmental stewardship (SDG 15).^{34,35}

13.38. Although village commons provide important economic benefits, their value is often underestimated, and they have gradually deteriorated due to encroachment, misuse, and ongoing pressures. According to Indian Space Research Organisation’s (ISRO) satellite-based observational study, Desertification and Land Degradation Atlas, degraded land expanded from 94.53 million hectares (28.8 per cent of geographical area) during 2003-05 to 96.40 million hectares (29.3 per cent) during 2011-13 to 97.85 million hectares (29.8 per cent) by 2018-19, adding roughly 2.2 lakh hectares annually.³⁶ The degradation has led to declining yields, increased cultivation costs, depleted water tables, shrinking forests, and the unregulated use of pastures. Non-availability of sewage treatment plants in villages has added another layer of complexity.

³² NSSO (1999). Common Property Resources in India. NSS 54th Round (January 1998–June 1998), Report No. 452 (54/31/4) (Table T1). <https://tinyurl.com/48xamx6r>.

³³ IFPRI (2021) The crucial value of India’s common lands <https://tinyurl.com/kbpptntn>

³⁴ Sandhu, H. et al 2023 The value of Indian commons Environ. Res. Lett. 18 013001 <https://tinyurl.com/bddudxj2>

³⁵ Prince Solomon Devadass, B., Sudharsan, S., Enoch, A., & Rachel, S. (2025). Common Property Resources as Drivers of the SDGs: Asset Creation and Revenue Generation in Vellaputhur Village, Tamil Nadu. Lex Localis- Journal of Local Self-Government, 23(S6), 6989–6990. <https://tinyurl.com/hbjt95e6>

³⁶ ISRO, Desertification and Land Degradation Atlas 2021. <https://tinyurl.com/2wchy92n>

13.39. The social and economic consequences of the degradation of common land are felt most acutely in rural areas, whose livelihoods are directly tied to their environment. To address this issue, the government has launched several restoration programmes like Mission Amrit Sarovar, to rejuvenate the village water bodies and SVAMITVA Yojana to map village commons and private properties, among many others.^{37,38} Village pond rejuvenation is being advanced through a combination of national initiatives, notably the Repair, Renovation, and Restoration of Water Bodies under the PM Krishi Sichai Yojana - Har Khet Ko Pani and the Jal Shakti Abhiyan: Catch The Rain, which together focus on restoring and sustaining traditional water bodies.³⁹

13.40. Protecting village commons in India aligns with Elinor Ostrom's principles for sustainable management of common-pool resources.^{40,41} These encompass clearly defined boundaries for resources and users; congruence of local rules with conditions; participatory rule modification for resource use; monitoring by community-accountable officials; graduated sanctions for violating rules; low-cost conflict resolution; autonomy for local institutions; and multiple interconnected layers of nested organisations, from small local groups at the base up to broader regional or higher-level bodies. When combined with tools such as GIS-based registries and targeted capacity building, this framework can both arrest degradation and enable rejuvenation of commons through interventions like solarisation and waste-to-energy projects.

13.41. Reviving and protecting village commons, therefore, requires a collaborative approach that involves both the government and local communities actively participating. To achieve this, first, 'village commons' as a distinct land-use category may need official incorporation with sub-categories, so that accurate estimation, monitoring, and informed policy intervention can be undertaken. At the state level, Karnataka and Rajasthan demonstrate how multi-tiered institutions can effectively systematise the mapping, documentation, and maintenance of databases on common natural resources, thereby enhancing the accuracy of village identification and management of commons.⁴² Second, with community participation, solarisation, and the establishment of sewage treatment plants that utilise village waste (such as plastic), effective use of village commons can be achieved. This will address both land degradation and environmental concerns and rebuild their ecological and livelihood functions. Third, a well-structured capacity-building effort for local body officials working in and

37 Mission Amrit Sarovar: <https://amritsarover.gov.in/login>

38 PIB release of MoPR dated 3 December 2025: <https://tinyurl.com/ywfhejk5>

39 PIB release of the Ministry of Jal Shakti dated 11 December 2025: <https://tinyurl.com/3sumbs4m>

40 Ostrom, E. (1990). Governing the commons: The evolution of institutions for collective action. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge university press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511807763>

41 Ostrom, E. (2005). Understanding institutional diversity. Princeton, NJ: Princeton university press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt7s7wm>

42 Chandran, N., & Singh, C. (2023). What a national registry can do for India's common lands. IDR (India Development Review). <https://tinyurl.com/bdevpc49>

related to rural areas would be beneficial. This can be achieved through institutions such as National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (NIRD&PR), State Institutes of Rural Development (SIRDs), Extension Training Centres (ETCs), and Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA) trainings, which equip officials with the skills necessary for the participatory rejuvenation of village commons through solarisation, waste-to-energy systems, and sustainable management.

13.42. Reviving village commons is crucial for rural India's economy and the livelihoods of its people. These shared resources support the daily needs and incomes of millions of families, while also conserving biodiversity and providing essential ecosystem services, such as water security and soil protection. Restoring and protecting the commons can strengthen rural livelihoods, safeguard nature, and unlock significant economic value, making them central to sustainable and inclusive development.

Harnessing social capital for livelihood

13.43. India is on the cusp of a major socio-economic transformation. It has emerged from a period of rapid growth, and sustaining it is both a challenge and an opportunity. With around 26 per cent of the population in the 10-24 age group, India's youth bulge demands jobs, enterprises, or both. Employment and entrepreneurship, in turn, ride on appropriate skills and education.⁴³ The search for jobs and a better life drives rural-to-urban migration, with nearly one in four rural Indians (26.8 per cent) being a migrant in 2020-21, and nearly 39 per cent of males migrating for employment reasons.^{44,45}

13.44. Urban India and peri-urban areas attract migrants seeking better education, health, livelihoods, services, entertainment, and perceived well-being, viewing living in the city as a success. However, cities may be reaching capacity limits, and continuous migration is unsustainable, with approximately 65 per cent of the population still residing in rural areas.⁴⁶ This rural-urban shift has side effects: as youth seek work in cities, support for older people diminishes, impacting their physical and mental health.

13.45. Amid these migration pressures, the path to sustainable progress lies in revitalising the rural economy by making rural communities more resilient and self-reliant. This can be achieved by incubating and strengthening self-sustaining rural enterprises, alongside skill development that generates local livelihoods and opportunities.

43 The United Nations Population Fund's (UNFPA) State of World Population - 2024 report – 'Interwoven Lives, Threads of Hope: Ending Inequalities in Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights' at pg 148 <https://tinyurl.com/46kr4n5r>

44 Multiple Indicator Survey in India (MoSPI 2023) Statement 31 & 33 <https://tinyurl.com/5henppxn>

45 Statement 7: Percentage distribution of migrants by reason for migration from PLFS 2020-21 <https://tinyurl.com/5emtunar>

46 World Bank staff estimates based on the United Nations Population Division's World Urbanisation Prospects: 2018 Revision. <https://tinyurl.com/4ayewxej>

13.46. Inclusive rural growth, in turn, depends on strengthening local institutions, improving access to education and healthcare, fostering entrepreneurship and innovation, preserving common resources, and reinforcing cultural knowledge systems and community pride. Such an approach also helps address distress-driven urban migration. Central to this is the need to operationalise social capital by converting community trust and networks into sustainable livelihood outcomes. Achieving these outcomes requires active stakeholder engagement and community participation, and several government initiatives are designed around these pillars. One such initiative is the DAY-NRLM.

13.47. It aims to reduce poverty by enabling poor households to access gainful self-employment and skilled wage employment opportunities, resulting in sustainable and diversified livelihood options for the poor. The Mission seeks to achieve its objective through investing in four core components, viz., (a) social mobilisation and promotion and strengthening of self-managed and financially sustainable community institutions for the rural poor women; (b) financial inclusion; (c) sustainable livelihoods; and (d) social inclusion, social development and access to entitlements through convergence.

13.48. The core of DAY-NRLM is its community-driven approach, which empowers rural women by building their capacities, providing financial support, and offering training to enhance their livelihoods and promote self-reliance. Key to implementation are community resources, such as social capital, specifically, trained SHG members who act as Community Resource Persons (CRPs) in thematic areas like agriculture, banking, insurance, and nutrition. With over 9 lakh CRPs active at the grassroots, the mission's federations give women a collective voice and agency. The goal is that families in the SHG network, for 6-8 years, achieve food security and multiple stable income sources, sustainably transforming rural livelihoods.

Table XIII.1: Key data points

Indicator	Cumulative progress
No. Of Blocks covered	7156
No.of SHGs promoted (in lakh)	90.90
No. of Households mobilised (in crore)	10.05
Capitalisation Support provided to SHGs (in ₹crore)	62453.85
Amt. of Bank credit accessed by SHGs (in ₹ lakh crore)	11.92
Number of individual enterprises set up under Startup Village Entrepreneurship Programme (in lakh)	4.02
Number of vehicles deployed under Aajeevika Grameen Express Yojana	2300
Number of Mahila Kisan covered (in crore)	4.92
Number of Custom Hiring Centres established	36,205
Number of households promoting agri-nutri gardens (in crore)	3.34
Source: M/o Rural Development (Till December 2025)	

**Table XIII. 2 NRLM: Empowering Rural communities -
From SHGs to Lakhpatti Didis**

 <p>1.49 lakh ‘Bank Sakhi’ women delivering financial services.</p> <p>9 lakh trained CRPs help with livelihood, health, and market interventions.</p>	 <p>3.95 lakh new rural businesses drive non-farm enterprises.</p> <p>Enhanced connectivity under Aajeevika Grameen Express Yojana.</p>	 <p>Social inclusion driven by 5,500 Gender Resource Centres & 35 lakh Gender Point Persons</p>	 <p>Saras & Aajeevika Brand: Path to 3 Crore Lakhpatti Didis</p> <p>Marketing support + Dedicated stores + e-commerce tie-ups</p>
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Skilling initiatives

13.49. While employment is a major driver of migration in rural areas, the creation of local livelihood opportunities alone is insufficient to build self-reliant villages. Equally critical is the development of a skilled workforce. Skill development programmes play a key role in empowering individuals by enhancing employability, supporting local economic activity, and contributing to broader social development. The Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY) is a skilling and placement initiative under the DAY NRLM.

13.50. DDU-GKY is a state-led scheme being implemented in public-private partnership (PPP) mode, based on a demand-driven target sanction process. The programme occupies a unique position among other skill training programs, due to its focus on financially vulnerable rural youth and its emphasis on sustainable employment through the prominence and incentives given to post-placement tracking, retention, and career progression. To ensure quality adherence, DDU-GKY mandates independent third-party certification, through Sector Skill Councils (SSC) of National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC), of every trainee to assess the skill, knowledge, and attitude of each trainee.

13.51. Complementing the DDU GKY, the Rural Self-Employment Training Institutes (RSETIs) Programme is a unique PPP initiative implemented through sponsor banks in collaboration with state governments. The programme aims to build a dedicated skill infrastructure in each district of the country for upskilling rural youth, particularly those from Below Poverty Line (BPL) and DAY-NRLM households, geared towards

entrepreneurship development. Currently, 629 RSETIs are operational across 616 districts in 33 states/UTs, supported by 25 financial institutions, forming a pan-India network of skill development and livelihood promotion centres that complements national efforts toward Atmanirbhar Bharat.

Capacity building for better governance

13.52. Capacity building is key to sustaining the development momentum in rural India. Local institutions, such as GPs, play a crucial role in decentralised governance by facilitating community participation, decision-making, and grassroots development. Strengthening their capacities through essential skills, such as planning, financial management, and leadership, and resources like training modules and digital tools, enhances institutional efficiency, local governance, and service delivery. To this end, the government implements a broad range of initiatives, focused on training programmes, digital governance platforms, institutional strengthening, and promoting community participation.

13.53. Various government institutions, such as NIRD&PR, SIRDs, and ETCs, offer targeted training to officials and Panchayat leaders. The NIRD&PR excels in training, research, and consultancy on rural development and Panchayati Raj. As a knowledge repository and government think tank, it builds the skills/attitudes of officials/non-officials through training, workshops, and seminars focused on the rural poor. The SIRDs train rural officials, functionaries, and elected representatives of PRI, and the ETCS impart training to village and block-level developmental functionaries.

13.54. In addition to these institutions, the centrally sponsored scheme RGSA, launched in April 2018, strengthens PRIs to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), emphasising convergence with Mission Antyodaya and a special focus in Aspirational Districts. Revamped in 2022, the scheme reimagines PRIs as vibrant centres of self-governance and economic growth, focusing on grassroots SDG localisation through thematic convergence, collaborative efforts between central and state governments, and a 'whole-of-government' approach. In FY25, more than 35 lakh participants have been trained under the RGSA scheme.

13.55. To enhance digital governance, the e-Panchayat Mission Mode Project of the government is digitising planning, budgeting, and service delivery through platforms like e-Gram Swaraj.⁴⁷ The project seeks to transform the functioning of PRIs, making them more transparent, accountable and effective as last-mile cutting-edge institutions of decentralised local self-governments. The e-Gram SWARAJ portal, launched in April 2020, provides a single window with the complete Profile of the GP, including details

⁴⁷ <https://egramswaraj.gov.in/>

of Sarpanch/Secretary, demography, finances, assets, activities taken up through the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP), and relevant information from Census 2011, SECC (Socio Economic and Caste Census) data, Mission Antyodaya survey report, etc. The portal acts as a unified interface that enhances the reporting and tracking of Panchayat activities. It decentralises the planning process to ensure development funds lead to effective outcomes.

13.56. Further, integration with the Public Financial Management System (PFMS) ensures secure, real-time payments, and AuditOnline enables transparent online audits.⁴⁸ So far, 2.54 lakh GPs have prepared and uploaded their GPDP for FY25 on e-Gram SWARAJ. Till October 2024, 2.21 lakh GPs or equivalent bodies (including Traditional Local Bodies) have carried out online transactions to the tune of ₹2,77,784 crore (since inception).

13.57. AI tools like SabhaSaar strengthen participatory democracy and local governance efficiency by reducing the time and effort required for manual documentation. As of November 2025, about one lakh GPs in 31 states/UTs conducted 1.38 lakh Gram Sabhas and generated automatic minutes of the meetings through SabhaSaar.⁴⁹

13.58. Along with building GP capacities, it is essential to assess development at the Panchayat level. The Panchayat Advancement Index (PAI) of the Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MoPR) assesses the overall holistic development, performance & progress of over 2.5 lakh GPs across India.⁵⁰ This assessment helps identify shortfalls, needed capacities, and improvement strategies. This initiative advances the vision of building vibrant PRIs as hubs of governance and growth through competitive federalism, motivating officials to deliver better services while boosting community participation. The index is discussed in detail in Box XIII.2.

Box XIII.2: Panchayat Advancement Index: A composite tool to track local SDG progress

GPs serve as the initial point of contact between citizens and governance in rural areas. Their proximity to local communities enables them to identify area-specific needs, prioritise development interventions, and ensure efficient utilisation of resources. GPs play a pivotal role in implementing government schemes and are central to achieving the SDGs at the grassroots level. Institutional mechanisms such as GPDPs, Gram Sabhas, and participatory budgeting frameworks strengthen participatory governance by contextualising national

⁴⁸ AuditOnline is an application rolled under the e-Panchayat Mission Mode Project by M/o Panchayati Raj.

⁴⁹ SabhaSaar is an AI-enabled application which makes Gram Sabha documentation faster, easier, and in a structured format.

⁵⁰ PIB release by MoPR dated 9 April 2025: <https://tinyurl.com/5n8acuy>

priorities, including the SDGs, within local development processes. Further, policy instruments such as the Panchayat Advancement Index (PAI) support local governments in monitoring performance and adopting evidence-based policy actions.

PAI is a composite, multi-domain index developed by the MoPR to systematically measure and monitor the progress of over 2.5 lakh GPs in achieving Localised Sustainable Development Goals (LSDGs). ⁵¹ It is built on 435 unique local indicators (331 mandatory and 104 optional) mapped to 566 data points. The indicators are aligned with the National Indicator Framework of MoSPI and organised across nine LSDG themes: poverty-free and enhanced livelihoods (32 indicators), healthy panchayat (21), child-friendly panchayat (82), water-sufficient panchayat (21), clean and green panchayat (33), self-sufficient infrastructure (159), socially just and socially secured panchayat (62), good governance (62), and women-friendly panchayat (44).

The PAI captures the multidimensional nature of rural development by using localised indicators that reflect social, economic, environmental and governance outcomes at the GP level. Each of the nine LSDG themes is operationalised through specific indicators. The granular indicator design ensures that global SDG targets are translated into measurable, locally relevant metrics that Panchayats can act upon through planning and convergence.

At its core, PAI is a performance measurement and ranking framework for GPs. By aggregating information across key dimensions of rural life under the nine themes, PAI acts as an effective instrument to assess areas that need more attention to ensure the effective utilisation of limited resources.

Role of PAI in Evidence-Based Planning

A central purpose of PAI is to use indicator-based scores to identify development gaps across themes and guide evidence-based GPDPs. By combining granular indicators with a transparent scoring and categorisation framework, PAI promotes healthy competition among Panchayats and encourages them to improve governance quality, service delivery and development outcomes. The index also offers policymakers at all levels, from State Governments and Members of Parliament to central ministries, a structured, indicator-based tool to assess ground-level SDG progress, refine schemes, and strengthen convergence around the LSDG themes.

Rural infrastructure

13.59. Strong infrastructure, including roads, housing, tap water connections, and digital connectivity, has been vital for inclusivity, as it links communities to markets, services, and opportunities that enhance the quality of life. Additionally, among the poor, housing plays a crucial role in enhancing the quality of life and facilitating their participation in the economy.

⁵¹ <https://pai.gov.in/>

13.60. Rural Connectivity is one of the key components in rural development and contributes crucially towards alleviating poverty. A high-quality all-weather road contributes to generating additional agricultural incomes, promoting productive employment, and improving access to health, education, and other essential services. Keeping that in view, the government launched Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) (referred to as PMGSY-I) on 25 December 2000 with the primary objective of providing all-weather road connectivity to the eligible unconnected habitations in rural India (500 persons and above in plains & 250 persons and above in hilly and NE areas as per the 2001 census). As of 15 January 2026, more than 99.6 per cent of eligible households have been provided with connectivity. Moreover, under PMGSY-I, 1,64,581 roads (6,44,735 km) & 7,453 bridges have been sanctioned, and 1,63,665 roads (6,25,117 km) & 7,210 bridges have been completed. Building on PMGSY-I, PMGSY-II was launched in 2013 to consolidate the existing Rural Road Network, improving its overall efficiency as a provider of transportation services for people, goods, and services. Under PMGSY-II, 6,664 roads (49,791 km) & 759 bridges have been sanctioned and 6,612 roads (49,087 km) & 749 bridges have been completed as of 15 January 2026.

13.61. The Government approved PMGSY Phase III in July 2019 for the consolidation of 1,25,000 km of routes and major rural links connecting habitations, inter alia, to Gramin Agricultural Markets (GrAMs), higher secondary schools, and hospitals. Under PMGSY-III, 15,965 roads (1,22,363 km) & 3,211 bridges have been sanctioned and 12,699 roads (1,02,926 km) & 1,734 bridges have been completed of 15 January 2026.

13.62. In a significant move towards achieving the sustainable rural infrastructure and circular economy goals of the SBM-Grameen Phase II, Chhattisgarh has constructed its first plastic waste-mixed bituminous road in Bastar district, marking an innovative milestone with potential for wide-scale replication. This 5.5-kilometre road, constructed under the PMGSY scheme between Kawapal and Kalguda GPs in Jagdalpur tehsil, includes 1.2 kilometres laid using non-recyclable plastic waste, blended with bitumen. This marks a first-of-its-kind initiative in the region, setting an example for environmentally responsible rural development. It embodies the ‘Waste to Wealth’ vision of SBM-Grameen Phase II by converting sanitation-linked plastic waste into productive rural infrastructure, particularly in a remote tribal belt. Beyond connecting two villages, it connects rural livelihoods with sustainability and demonstrates a scalable circular economy model that can inform similar efforts across rural India, paving the way for a cleaner, greener, and more prosperous future.

13.63. The Pradhan Mantri Janjati Adivasi Nyaya Maha Abhiyan (PM-JANMAN) scheme targets 75 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in 18 states and one UT, aiming for 100 per cent saturation of government schemes in 28,700 PVTG habitations, covering approximately 48.22 lakh individuals (12.28 lakh households).

Under PM-JANMAN, 2,495 roads (7,324 km) & 164 bridges have been sanctioned, and 263 roads (1,314 km) have been completed as of 15 January 2026.

13.64. Additionally, the government has initiated the Dharti Abha-Janjatiya Gram Utkarsh Abhiyan (DA-JGUA) scheme in convergence with the PMGSY-IV. The initiative, covering more than 63,000 tribal villages, focuses on improving access to clean water, housing, education, healthcare, and sustainable livelihoods.

13.65. The environment is central to the sustainability and well-being of tribal communities residing in villages, often located in ecologically sensitive and resource-rich areas. Environmental sustainability is strengthened through the Pradhan Mantri Janjatiya Vikas Mission (PMJVM), which fosters tribal entrepreneurship and sustainable use of natural resources, especially Minor Forest Produce (MFP). Under the PMJVM, 4105 Van Dhan Vikas Kendras have been established, benefiting approximately 12 lakh people across 28 states/UTs. The Forest Rights Act 2006 has enabled the distribution of 23.92 lakh individual and 1.22 lakh community titles, covering 233.48 lakh acres, reinforcing community stewardship over forests and resources.

13.66. India's tribal areas present a significant opportunity for green economic development due to several factors. The tribal population in the country is significant, with approximately 1.45 lakh tribal villages, and tribals make up about 8.9 per cent of the total population, predominantly residing in biodiverse forests and hilly regions.^{52,53} These Tribal communities possess valuable, sustainable traditional knowledge that supports biodiversity and reliance on forest resources. The economic value of the Natural Services provided by India's forests is estimated to be worth a substantial ₹128 trillion per year, highlighting the significant economic potential of these ecosystems (Krishnan, A., 2020).⁵⁴ Yet, biodiversity science and its connections to human well-being in India remain largely unexplored. Box XIII.3 presents how effective integration of traditional knowledge, digital infrastructure and community engagement can empower tribal communities.

Box XIII.3: Empowering tribal communities to embrace digital technologies and practices

Tribal communities, traditionally, practice agriculture but at a very primitive level of the value chain. What we see in tribal villages is an agricultural system in harmony with nature, adopting deep ecological knowledge, preserving soil and ecosystem health, and utilising

⁵² M/o Tribal Affairs Gap analysis: <https://tribal.nic.in/GapAnalysis.aspx>

⁵³ PIB release of the M/o Tribal Affairs dated 2 December 2022: <https://tinyurl.com/zxurk5ew>

⁵⁴ Krishnan, A. 2020. National mission on biodiversity and human well-being: for a greener, healthier and more sustainable way of life. <https://tinyurl.com/yjvt8a7u>

mixed farming, crop rotation, water management, and the use of local resources, while meeting the food and nutrition needs of the tribal community. Atmanirbharta (self-reliance) has been the lifestyle of tribal communities in India since time immemorial, and it is a historically accurate and visible phenomenon.

Hence, the relevance of this eco-friendly, zero-fossil-fuel system has increased further in times of climate change and erratic weather. India's green economy and tribal farming practices, while facing significant challenges, possess a huge potential for a sustainable future.

Supporting smart tribal farming practices, through technological assistance, policy support, and financial investment, can lead to the scaling up of a viable green agricultural model for India and potentially the Global South. This can be achieved through locally appropriate interventions, efficient resource utilisation, and community ownership, addressing the structural constraints faced by tribal farmers. Across multiple states, grassroots initiatives demonstrate how tribal agriculture can be revitalised by blending indigenous knowledge with appropriate, low-cost technologies and institutional support. The experience from Odisha illustrates the practical application of this approach. Since 2023, the Strengthening of Livelihoods of a Rural Tribal Farmer initiative has been led by Odisha's Soil Conservation and Watershed Development Department in the Gajapati district.⁵⁵ Key interventions include excavating around 200 individual farm ponds and four cluster ponds for rainwater harvesting and year-round irrigation, alongside awareness drives for integrated farming systems that blend crops, poultry, aquaculture, horticulture, and modern drip/sprinkler technology for irrigation. This initiative is supported by a multi-departmental convergence for infrastructure, inputs, training, and market linkages. The initiative led to an increase in annual income of households from ₹1,500 to nearly ₹90,000, strengthened livelihoods, reduced distress migration, and renewed youth interest in farming.

In Madhya Pradesh, NGOs and Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs) have played a central role in reviving traditional agrobiodiversity and improving productivity through frontline demonstrations and community seed banks. For example, community-run seed banks in Jhabua are helping tribal farmers.⁵⁶ They promote household-level seed collection, structured seed exchange, and local seed multiplication, enabling farmers to re-adopt traditional and organic farming practices while reducing dependence on external seed markets. The initiative is supported by farmer training, the formation of seed producer groups, and the use of simple documentation tools.⁵⁷

Complementing these community-driven models are solar irrigation cooperatives that enable year-round cultivation and crop diversification. A similar initiative in Jharkhand enabled Oraon farmers to cultivate vegetables, thereby reducing the need for seasonal migration. Combined with mobile agro-advisory services that integrate local crop calendars

⁵⁵ Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India. Strengthening of livelihoods of a rural tribal <https://tinyurl.com/yck9b97c>

⁵⁶ Manan Deva, A. (2025). Rooted Technologies: How Tribal Farmers Are Merging Traditional Knowledge with Agri-Tech for Climate Resilience. Social Innovations Journal, 31. <https://tinyurl.com/pdfn72eu>

⁵⁷ Community seed banks: <https://samparkmp.org/community-seed-bank/>

with timely weather and pest information, this would enable yield stabilisation.⁵⁸ Together, these approaches point to an ‘indigenous agri-tech’ paradigm, where the integration of indigenous knowledge with technology can significantly enhance the livelihoods of tribal farmers.

In this context, a proactive and development initiative has been in visualising a Smart Tribal Farming Initiative - A digital transformation of agriculture in tribal areas for manifold tribal farmers' income, as a pilot project in a cluster of 10-15 tribal villages in various Districts of India, in association with NGOs working with tribal communities and higher educational institutions with digital infrastructures.⁵⁹ The initiative is built on developing a comprehensive digital tribal agriculture mission that transforms tribal farming and allied sectors through digital commodity value chains, climate and risk management advisories, data-driven soil and health management through a digital agriculture resource information system, digitally mapped ‘twin’ villages, validated indigenous practices, and support for sustainable natural farming.

India’s tribal regions hold ecological, cultural, and economic potential. A coordinated policy that promotes smart tribal farming through targeted investments, digital tools, capacity building, and community ownership can transform tribal farming from a subsistence activity to a key component of sustainable rural development.

13.67. With the aim to achieve the objective of ‘Housing for All’, the Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana -Gramin is being implemented w.e.f. 1 April 2016 with the aim of providing 4.95 crore pucca houses with basic amenities to all eligible houseless households living in kutcha and dilapidated houses in rural areas by 2029. A total target of 4.14 crore houses has been allocated to states/UTs, out of which 3.86 crore have been sanctioned, and 2.93 crore have been completed so far. Further, 76.98 lakh houses pending from earlier schemes were also completed, which takes the overall completion of houses in rural areas in the last 11 years to 3.70 crore.

13.68. To meet the aspiration for ‘Har Ghar Jal’ in rural areas, the government has been implementing the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) since August 2019 in partnership with the states. At launch, only 3.23 crore (17 per cent) rural households had tap connections. By 20 November 2025, over 12.50 crore more households were covered, increasing total coverage to about 15.74 crore (81.31 per cent), improving the living standards of rural households. JJM has delivered transformative social and health outcomes, as evidenced by independent assessments. SBI Research reports a sharp decline in women fetching water from outside homes, boosting participation in agricultural and allied activities.⁶⁰ The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates daily time savings of over 5.5 crore

⁵⁸ Ibid note 56 above

⁵⁹ Led by Shobhit University, Meerut (<https://tinyurl.com/4nphz9mp>) In Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, J&K, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, Assam and Manipur

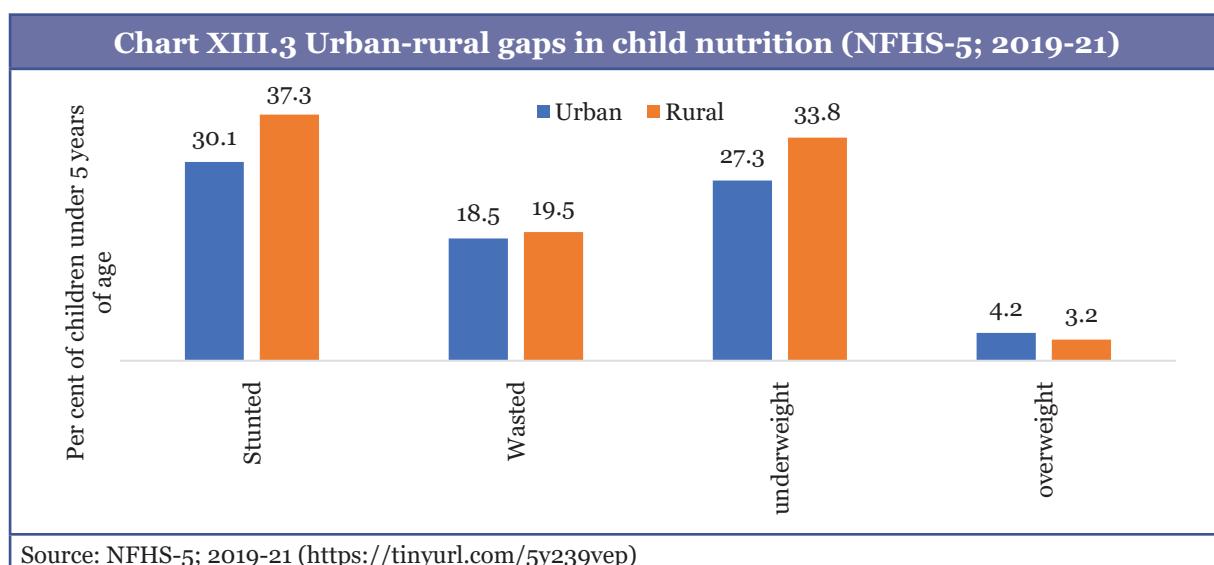
⁶⁰ SBI Research. (18 October 2024). Social fabrics: <https://tinyurl.com/yh8f48e3>

hours, the prevention of nearly 4 lakh diarrhoeal deaths, and savings of approximately 14 million DALYs.⁶¹

13.69. These health gains from JJM show how rural infrastructure directly affects rural well-being. Beyond economic benefits, schemes like PM GSY, SBM-Grameen, and JJM are vital for rural health, reducing disease burden from unsafe water and poor sanitation, and improving access to healthcare.

Rural wellbeing

13.70. Investment in improving health infrastructure has improved the availability of health services in rural areas. It is essential that this improvement translates into better outcomes for people, including their health, nutrition, and overall well-being, for development to be truly effective. Chapter 11 of the Survey discusses the progress of various health initiatives by the government, highlighting gains in service coverage and access. At the same time, while child nutrition indicators such as stunting, wasting, and underweight have improved over time, the urban-rural gap remains a challenge.



13.71. In Chapter 11, Box XI.9 discusses how social and behavioural change communication (SBCC) strategies can improve scheme outcomes for pregnant and lactating mothers and children by promoting appropriate diets and child feeding practices. SBCC for caregiver education and community participation can help enhance health-seeking behaviours. Evidence suggests that using a behaviour change communication approach through SHGs improves newborn care practices.⁶²

⁶¹ PIB release dated 26 October 2025: <https://tinyurl.com/8r5x2pm3>

⁶² Saggurti, N., Porwal, A., Atmavilas, Y. et al. Effect of behavioral change intervention around new-born care practices among most marginalized women in self-help groups in rural India: analyses of three cross-sectional surveys between 2013 and 2016. <https://tinyurl.com/3y64mh5t>

13.72. Telemedicine has the potential to improve health outcomes in underserved areas, especially when local community healthcare providers actively support and promote its use in rural communities. Furthermore, strengthening front-line workers led outreach by supporting ASHA⁶³, ANM⁶⁴, and AWW⁶⁵ to conduct regular home visits and village health days focused on maternal and newborn care, with clear training materials, communication guidelines, and technology such as mobile apps, AI chatbots, and dashboards (e.g. ASHABot⁶⁶, ASHA Kirana's M-CAT⁶⁷ and ASHA Digital Health⁶⁸) can help improve outcomes in rural areas.

Participatory budgeting and planning

13.73. The effectiveness of rural infrastructure investments depends on effective planning, allocation, and monitoring at the local level. Participatory budgeting and strong local governance empower communities to prioritise projects, use resources efficiently, and ensure infrastructure aligns with local needs.

13.74. Despite receiving grants from the Central Finance Commission and State Finance Commissions, PRIs are unable to meet their potential and public expectations due to insufficient resources. Greater financial independence through Own Sources of Revenue (OSR) enables PRIs to make more informed decisions on expenditure, thereby improving efficiency and accountability. Improving OSR strengthens the link between revenue generation and expenditure decisions, promoting efficiency and accountability in service delivery. Several states/UTs have established rules enabling Panchayats to levy and collect taxes, duties, and fees. However, many states and UTs, such as Arunachal Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Manipur, Nagaland, Sikkim, Uttar Pradesh, Andaman & Nicobar Islands, Dadra and Nagar Haveli & Daman and Diu, Ladakh, and Lakshadweep, do not have such provisions, underscoring the need for rules to enhance local governance across the country.

13.75. Incentives such as matching grants in Andaman & Nicobar and financial rewards in Goa, along with shared mining royalties, the District Mineral Fund (DMF), and Goods and Services Tax (GST) collections, further support PRI revenues. Additionally, funds from mining royalties, the DMF, and GST are shared with Panchayats to align financial resources with local governance needs.

⁶³ Accredited Social Health Activist

⁶⁴ Auxiliary Nurse Midwife

⁶⁵ Anganwadi worker

⁶⁶ <https://tinyurl.com/23zfftzj>

⁶⁷ Srinidhi V, Karachiwala B, Iyer A, Reddy B, Mathrani V, Madhiwalla N, et al. ASHA Kirana: when digital technology empowered front-line health workers. *BMJ Global Health*. 2021;6:e005039. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmgh-2021-005039>

⁶⁸ <https://tinyurl.com/3kvabrmv>

13.76. MoPR is actively working in collaboration with the states to augment OSR generation in PRIs by facilitating the formulation of relevant rules. The Ministry has developed the Samarth application for generating and collecting tax demands at the PRI level and is collaborating with institutions like IIM-A on capacity-building modules. These OSR and technology reforms empower Gram Sabhas and Panchayats with reliable local resources, strengthening participatory budgeting, planning, and prioritisation at the grassroots level.⁶⁹

13.77. In addition to participatory budgeting, SBCC initiatives play a vital role in empowering beneficiaries as drivers of desired outcomes while strengthening PRIs to achieve development goals. The Box XI.9 of chapter 11 discusses how an effective communication strategy can help drive scheme outcomes. Box XIII.4 advances this discussion.

Box XIII. 4 Communication for rural development and transformation

True progress in rural areas arises from community ownership rather than solely top-down approaches. Shifts in mindset transform passive residents into active participants. Communication strategies address this by sharing targeted knowledge through innovative channels and tools that enable communities to become proactive agents of lasting change. Driving behaviour change is a process, not a one-time event, requiring tailored messages and channels to move people from being unaware to adopting and maintaining new behaviours.

MoPR is spearheading SBCC campaigns through engaging digital narratives to transform grassroots governance mindsets and practices. Using the multimedia mode, the ministry partnered with The Viral Fever (TVF) for the "*Phulera Ka Panchayati Raj*" series, featuring three episodes, to sensitise the digital audience about the issues affecting GPs across India through stories that champion self-reliant GPs. In the three episodes, these films highlight own-source revenue through local taxes, challenge the 'Sarpanch Pati' (Pradhan Pati or Mukhiya Pati) culture, advocate for true women's leadership, and address the impact of the SVAMITVA Scheme and digital governance tools, such as the Meri Panchayat App, showcasing how rural communities are gaining access to transparent and efficient services.⁷⁰

The initiatives embody core SBCC principles outlined in governance frameworks, including audience segmentation, pre-tested messaging via mass media channels, and participatory motivation to sustain behavioural shifts, such as revenue mobilisation and gender-inclusive decision-making.

Another initiative to enable the transfer of knowledge to the citizens is the Meri Panchayat App, developed by the MoPR. The app is a mobile governance tool that aggregates data from various GP portals, making it easily accessible to the public to promote transparency and accountability. It provides comprehensive details on demographics, elected representatives, Panchayat secretaries and officials, development plans, funds received, income and expenditure,

69 PIB release of MoPR dated 23 June 2025: <https://tinyurl.com/8w4w7hhc>

70 Press Release by MoPR dated 5 May 2025 <https://tinyurl.com/5n97hx4r>

resolutions (Sankalp), bank accounts, and statements. This holistic view empowers citizens to monitor Panchayat functioning, while elected representatives and functionaries can use dedicated login IDs to efficiently manage their tasks. Complementing this is the eGramSwaraj-BHASHINI integration, which allows eGramSwaraj to provide services in 22 scheduled languages of India through Bhashini's AI-powered translation, making local-language accessibility a reality for users across India. By overcoming linguistic barriers, this initiative promotes inclusive participation among Panchayat officials and citizens, improving service delivery and empowering Panchayats to address community needs more effectively, driving progress in rural governance.

To address water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), health and nutrition related issues and bring behaviour change to adopt recommended practices among SHG members, DAY-NRLM has been implementing Food, Nutrition, Health and WASH (FNHW) interventions. Under FNHW, the states are developing state-specific operational strategies focusing on awareness generation and SBCC related to maternal and child health and nutrition, diet diversity, reducing anaemia, menstrual hygiene, diarrhoea, usage of toilets, hand washing and management of solid and liquid waste. FNHW component focuses on the creation of awareness on consumption of the produce from nutri-gardens, backyard poultry, small ruminants (goatery, piggery, etc.) and dairy-related interventions under the mission and other sources for improving nutritional intake. Around 6,406 blocks of 683 districts have initiated FNHW interventions.

Such initiatives stimulate community dialogue, enhance knowledge of panchayat activities, government schemes, and their impact, and ensure government interventions yield desired results and foster changes in attitude toward inclusive governance. Local administrators, including Sarpanches, acquire skills in e-governance, resource optimisation, and SDG localisation, as evidenced by the SBCC campaigns' emphasis on 'waste-to-wealth' and self-reliance themes, which mirror SBM-G innovations.

These interventions can be further leveraged to improve accountability. Information sharing about PAI progress with citizens can incentivise Panchayats to improve PAI scores. By promoting demand for services like those in RGSA (capacity building, e-governance), these efforts will elevate PRIs as vibrant SDG hubs. Overall, these initiatives illustrate how an innovative communication strategy can drive behavioural change, strengthen accountability, and promote inclusive, self-reliant Panchayats.

SOCIAL JUSTICE AS AN ENABLER OF INCLUSION

13.78. Taken together, the progress in poverty reduction and rural development underscores how far India has moved in expanding opportunities and improving living standards for large sections of its population. Going beyond the target of poverty eradication, the goal of Viksit Bharat encompasses building an inclusive society where growth and development translate into fairness, dignity, and equal rights for all sections of society.

13.79. To build such a fair society, the government, through the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, adopts a comprehensive approach to empower vulnerable populations across four key focus areas: social, economic, educational, and rehabilitative empowerment. Programmes include scholarship schemes, free coaching, a scheme for residential education in targeted areas, welfare programmes for senior citizens such as Atal Vayo Abhyuday Yojana (AVYAY) and Pradhan Mantri Anusuchit Jaati Abhyuday Yojana (PMAJAY), as well as rehabilitation measures and initiatives for the economic empowerment of targeted groups.

13.80. The venture capital fund for Scheduled Caste (SC) and Backward Classes startups has supported over 160 enterprises from these communities. The VISVAS Yojana (Vanchit Ikai Samooh Aur Vargon Ko Aarthik Sahayata) is an initiative for financial inclusion, offering credit support, interest subvention, and working in convergence with other programmes like MUDRA⁷¹, NRLM⁷², PRAYAAS⁷³, etc., to improve the livelihood activities of marginalised groups. The progress made under various initiatives is detailed in Table XIII.3.

Table XIII.3: Key schemes to improve social justice

Scheme	Current FY26 (Up to December, 2025)
Pre-matric scholarship schemes for SCs & others - Centrally sponsored scheme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 17.14 lakh beneficiaries. • ₹359.47 crore of central share released
Post-matric scholarship schemes for the SCs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 34.42 lakh beneficiaries • ₹4370.22 crore of the central share released
SMILE - Rehabilitation for the welfare of transgender persons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 23 Garima Grehs, shelter homes in 17 states/UTs • 20 Transgender Protection Cells are set up • 27 Transgender Welfare Boards • National Portal for Transgender Persons - to issue Transgender certificates and ID cards • 30,386 certificates issued • Equal Opportunities Policy for Transgender Persons has been issued • 18 projects received assistance with ₹5.31 Crore released

⁷¹ Micro Units Development & Refinance Agency.

⁷² National Rural Livelihoods Mission.

⁷³ Promoting Regular & Assisted Migration for Youth and Skilled Professionals.

SMILE - Comprehensive rehabilitation of persons engaged in the act of begging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Covers 181 cities 26,781 individuals have been identified 7,952 persons, including 1,317 children, rehabilitated
Scheme for the implementation of the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955 and the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 - Centrally sponsored scheme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Around 87,426 victims of atrocity are proposed to be provided relief 26056 couples are proposed to be given an incentive for inter-caste marriage
Scheme for residential education for students in high schools in targeted areas.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ₹103.47 crore utilised and 8898 beneficiaries provided support for school and hostel facility.
National Action Plan for Drug Demand Reduction - Centrally sponsored scheme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 349 Integrated Rehabilitation Centres for addicts 45 Community-based Peer-led Intervention programmes for children 76 Outreach and Drop-in Centres - with provision of screening, assessment, and counselling 154 Addiction treatment facilities 139 District de-addiction centres Toll-free Helpline for de-addiction: 14446
Nasha Mukt Bharat Abhiyaan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 25.53 crore people sensitised since launch in August 2020. 20,000+ Master Volunteers identified and trained
Atal Vayo Abhyuday Yojana	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ₹287.81 crore utilised under the four programmes - Integrated Programme for Senior Citizens, State Action Plan for Senior Citizens, Rashtriya Vayoshri Yojana, Elder line: National Helpline for Senior Citizens
Pradhan Mantri Anusuchit Jaati Abhyuday Yojana	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ₹144.63 crore utilised 2611 Adarsh gram declared 3 hostels sanctioned for 410 beneficiaries
Scholarships for higher education for young achievers' scheme (SHREYAS) for SCs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ₹166.98 crore supported 3974 beneficiaries for higher studies in India ₹29.93 crore supported 44 beneficiaries for higher education abroad ₹43.98 crore supported 1495 beneficiaries for higher education in premier educational institutions in India

13.81. Furthermore, the National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP) is implemented by the government as a social security programme designed for the vulnerable segment of our society. The objective of the programme is to provide a basic level of financial assistance to old age, widows, and disabled persons, as well as to bereaved households in the event of the death of the breadwinner belonging to the BPL. NSAP caters to 3.09 crore BPL beneficiaries. Further, states/UTs are also providing financial assistance to an additional 5.86 crore beneficiaries through State Pension Schemes. Therefore, around nine crore beneficiaries (central NSAP plus additional state beneficiaries) are covered under the pension safety net of the country at an estimated annual expenditure of more than ₹1 lakh crore.

13.82. Aadhaar-based Mobile Application for Digital Life Certification (DLC) of NSAP pension beneficiaries has been recently launched in July, 2025. A total of 47.76 lakh beneficiaries, as of 13 January 2026, have been authenticated through DLC across India. This digital innovation streamlines verification, reduces leakages, and enhances efficiency in delivering social assistance, aligning with Viksit Bharat's vision of inclusive, tech-enabled welfare for vulnerable groups.

13.83. For the inclusive development of minorities in the country, the government is ensuring universal access to education, skills, healthcare, and financial opportunities, while leveraging technology to enhance the ease of living, transparency, and good governance. The Ministry of Minority Affairs implements schemes for six notified minority communities⁷⁴, including educational scholarships (Pre-Matric, Post-Matric, Merit-cum-Means), employment support via Pradhan Mantri Virasat ka Samvardhan and National Minorities Development and Finance Corporation (NMDFC) loans, special initiatives like Jiyo Parsi for population reversal and Waqf development, and for development of community infrastructure and basic amenities under Pradhan Mantri Jan Vikas Karyakram scheme.

13.84. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs implements several programmes for the socio-economic development of tribal communities and the protection of tribal rights. These include capacity-building initiatives such as the Adi Karmyogi Abhiyaan to strengthen decentralised tribal leadership and governance; the DA-JGUA to bridge infrastructure gaps, enhance access to health, education and Anganwadi services, and promote livelihoods; scholarship schemes; Eklavya Model Residential Schools to provide quality education to ST children in remote areas; the Pradhan Mantri Janjati Adiwasi Nyaya Maha Abhiyan for the development of 75 PVTG communities; and credit support through the National Scheduled Tribes Finance and Development Corporation.

⁷⁴ Sikh, Jain, Christian, Muslim, Parsi and Buddhist.

13.85. Building on these initiatives for the upliftment of vulnerable sections, minorities, and tribal communities, focused measures are also being undertaken for the welfare of sanitation workers. This is discussed in the following section.

Uplifting sanitation workers and waste pickers

13.86. The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, was enacted to correct the historical injustice and indignity suffered by people employed to clean insanitary dry latrines and sewers. The Hon'ble Supreme Court has consistently issued directions to central and state governments to eradicate the practice, and has recently directed that it be banned in six major metropolitan cities. The Court has enhanced compensation for the deaths of sanitation workers to ₹30 lakh and highlighted the weak enforcement of the ban.⁷⁵

13.87. With the realisation that the eradication of an injustice rooted in the iniquitous caste system requires more than just laws. Efforts for the sustained rehabilitation of manual scavengers have been reinvigorated with the launch of the National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE) scheme in July 2023. The Scheme aims to ensure the safety and dignity of sanitation workers. The focus is on preventing hazardous cleaning and promoting safe cleaning practices through trained and certified sanitation workers. The objective of the scheme is to formalise and rehabilitate the persons engaged in hazardous cleaning of sewer and septic tanks.

13.88. Under the scheme 89,104 sewer and septic tank workers (SSW) have been validated and profiled across the country for interventions. A comprehensive survey for identifying SSWs has been mandated by the Act for local governments; hence, a clear estimate for the country as a whole has yet to be compiled. The Swaach Sarvekshan survey in FY25 covered 4,589 urban local bodies (ULB). The use of this survey to estimate SSWs and waste pickers would ensure better coverage, uniformity in the criteria applied, and establish a country-wide baseline. This would help all future planning, enable better targeting and more efficient allocation of resources.

13.89. The continued use of workers in dehumanising and degrading sanitation roles, despite legal and administrative measures, indicates deeper systemic socio-cultural problems.⁷⁶ The majority of SSWs hail from a few castes, such as Valmiki, Mehtar, Dom, Madiga, Mala, etc., and they have historically faced stigma and discrimination. Addressing such deep-set caste-based stigma requires society-wide educational and behaviour change interventions to de-stigmatise and dismantle discriminatory

⁷⁵ Rekha v. State (NCT) of Delhi, 2024 SCC OnLine Del 3683, decided on 13 May 2024 <https://tinyurl.com/stw73drt>.

⁷⁶ Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy Blog: Still cleaning with bare hands. <https://tinyurl.com/mwar5ph8>

practices in re-employment. Civil society participation is vital for the eradication of manual scavenging and the sustained rehabilitation of SSWs. Given that the ULBs play a key role in identifying SSWs and implementing interventions, a performance-linked incentive and a penalty for non-compliance could be instituted to ensure better outcomes of the schemes targeting SSWs.

13.90. As a means to improve safety and increase mechanisation, 85,743 PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) kits and 653 Safety Device Kits for Emergency Response Sanitation Units have been provided to states/UTs. Additionally, capital subsidy has been released to 779 SSWs and their dependents for sanitation-related projects. Around 84,309 waste pickers have been validated with e-KYC in ULBs, and approximately 7,500 PPE kits have been distributed among them.

13.91. Mechanisation of sewer cleaning has been successfully employed by advanced countries, and they have transitioned to the application of higher-end technologies. Local governments in Japan utilise AI-enabled mapping, robotic cleaners, and suction systems to reduce human entry into their ageing sewerage systems. The EU has developed automated systems, such as PipeGuard and PIPEON, that integrate robotics, predictive maintenance, and real-time monitoring. In India, vehicle-integrated machines and robotic cleaners have been developed indigenously. Domestic production of these and other safety devices should be scaled up, and ULBs should be mandated to acquire them. Private investment in the production, operation, and maintenance of these machines, as well as job work contracts, should be incentivised by the ULBs.

13.92. Efforts to rehabilitate SSWs include providing housing, healthcare, skill development, and alternative employment opportunities. Over 70,000 SSWs have been covered under Ayushman Bharat – PM Jan Arogya Yojana, a state health insurance scheme that provides coverage for healthcare costs. The National Safai Karamcharis Finance and Development Corporation offers loan schemes that are implemented through channelising agencies and provides skill development/training through government sector training institutions. The corporation has supported over 6,600 beneficiaries with over ₹53.07 crore through various initiatives.⁷⁷ Together, these legal, technological, and welfare measures aim to enhance safety and improve livelihoods for sanitation workers, while addressing the deep-rooted socio-cultural barriers that have perpetuated this practice.

OUTLOOK

13.93. The idea of equality, that not everyone may have the same outcomes, but they should have the same opportunities, is central to inclusive development. Providing

⁷⁷ National Safai Karamcharis Finance & Development Corporation: <https://nskfdc.nic.in/>.

equal opportunity entails tackling the layers of disadvantage experienced by various groups within a population. Increasing social mobility is not simply an argument for equality; it is also an economic argument: encouraging equality of opportunity is critical for economic efficiency since it maximises the utilisation of individual skills. This, in turn, demands ensuring access to opportunities and basic necessities.

13.94. The government's initiatives to lift the vulnerable out of the cycle of deprivation have yielded positive results, as reflected in various measures of poverty reduction. Government policies have had a significant influence on income distribution, primarily through subsidies, pensions, direct transfers, and public expenditures on social services, including education and healthcare. This is evident from the recent Household Consumption Expenditure Survey 2023-24, which reports a decline in consumption inequality and improved outcomes for the most vulnerable. The survey shows that the largest growth in average monthly per capita expenditure (MPCE) between 2022-23 and 2023-24 occurred among the bottom 5-10 per cent of the population in both rural and urban areas.

13.95. With gains in consumption for the most vulnerable, especially in rural areas, the path forward lies in amplifying this momentum through rural economic development. Reviving the rural economy through local opportunities and innovation is essential. There is a need to safeguard the environment, preserve culture and tradition, and promote inclusive growth across rural India. Local, decentralised economies should thrive, support livelihoods, and enhance living conditions. Growth does not need to be disruptive; rural communities can learn new skills, find livelihoods, maintain their health and financial stability, restore household harmony, and access modern education while preserving their cultural heritage, connections, and respect for the Earth.

13.96. While the progress in social indicators suggests the effectiveness of targeted policies, sustaining and further enhancing social development requires active engagement of communities and continuous feedback mechanisms. Frequent technology-enabled surveys should be established to enable targeted, data-driven interventions. Positive case studies must be documented and widely disseminated to encourage replication, while students, community elders, citizens, and prominent personalities should be engaged as role models to reinforce desired behaviours and strengthen community participation. Going forward, a framework of shared responsibility and respect must remain at the centre of India's growth journey. By making governance a two-way process, we can not only bridge the gap between policy and people but also nurture citizens who are proud, self-reliant, and prepared for the future.
