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National Rurban mission in India: Outcomes, challenges, and reflections for inclusive development

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Abstract

India's continuing rural to urban disparity continues to influence gaps in infrastructure, livelihood opportunities, and public services. Launched in 2016, the Shyama Prasad Mukherji National Rurban Mission (NRuM) seeks to create "Rurban clusters" that maintain rural traits while offering urban conveniences. Improvements in infrastructure, skill development, job creation, and decreased migration in multiple clusters are highlighted in this study, which is based on secondary data from government publications and research studies. However, the mission encounters obstacles like deficiencies in healthcare and sanitation facilities, poor monitoring, inadequate decentralization, and delays in Critical Gap Funding. Sustainable regional development requires strengthening scheme convergence, empowering Panchayati Raj Institutions, and increasing transparency. NRuM's inclusive, community-based planning has great potential to close India's rural to urban divide.

Keywords: National Rurban mission, Rurban clusters, rural–urban divide, regional development, decentralization, infrastructure

Introduction

India's development trajectory is marked by growing economic prosperity but high inequality, which often exacerbates the existing rural–urban divide. One of the current policy instruments to address this divide is the National Rurban Mission, which aims to improve infrastructure and service provision, facilitate regional development and attract investment in rural areas. Against the backdrop of growing rural unrest on one hand and emerging evidence of unsustainable development in the urban on the other, we examine the National Rurban Mission and its discursive underpinnings. We find that while the mission and its stated aims are a promising step to improve regional development, its focus on 'smart villages' and seeing urbanisation as the only development model, undermines the strengths and challenges in rural India. We highlight ways in which the mission can avoid some past pitfalls of development interventions in India while strengthening its mandate of facilitating inclusive regional development. On 21 February 2016, Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the Shyama Prasad Mukherji

Rurban Mission 2 with an outlay of Rs. 5142.08 crores. The launch was held in Dongargad, Chhattisgarh, suitably far from the urban and sufficiently rural in character for PM Modi to claim he had 'brought the government out of Delhi and into the people' (PIB, 2016).

As per Census of India statistics, the rural population in India, stands at 833 million, constituting almost 68 per cent of the total population (Census, 2011)^[12]. Further, the rural population has shown a growth of 12 per cent and an increase in the absolute number of villages by 2279 units during the 2001-2011 period. Shyama Prasad Mukherji Rurban Mission (SPMRM) was announced in the Union Budget 2014-15.

This was following the Rurban development model of urbanization of the rural areas, adapted in the state of Gujarat through which people living in the rural areas are given efficient civic infrastructure and associate services. Ensuring availability of amenities to rural populace is on the top priority of the central government as 67% of India's population resides in villages.

Large parts of rural areas in the country are not stand-alone

settlements but part of a cluster of settlements, which are relatively proximate to each other. These clusters typically illustrate potential for growth, have economic drivers and derive locational and competitive advantages. These clusters once developed can then be classified as 'Rurban'. Hence taking cognizance of this, the Government of India has proposed the Shyama Prasad Mukherji Rurban Mission (SPMRM), aimed at developing such rural areas by provisioning of economic, social and physical infrastructure facilities.

Taking also into view, the advantages of clusters, both from an economic view point as well as to optimize benefits of infrastructure provision, the Mission aims at development of 300 Rurban clusters, in the next five years. These clusters would be strengthened with the required amenities, for which it is proposed that resources be mobilized through convergence of various schemes of the Government, over and above which a Critical Gap Funding (CGF) would be provided under this Mission, for focused development of these clusters. Required amenities, for which it is proposed that resources be mobilize required amenities, for which it is proposed that resources be mobilize These clusters would be strengthened with the various schemes of the Government, over and above which a Critical Gap Funding (CGF) would be provided under this Mission, for focused development of these clusters. This Mission would herein after be referred to as National Rurban Mission (NRuM).

Review of literature

Gibson *et.al* (2017) ^[2] study reported that growth of secondary towns has, in fact, led to a greater reduction in rural poverty compared with the growth of metropolitan cities because the former are more accessible to the rural workforce.

Nagpaul (1996) ^[13] Rural-urban disparities in India manifest in economic opportunities, infrastructure access, and policy focus

Singh and Rahman (2018) ^[19] study revealed that National Rurban Mission is a timely initiative aiming to bridge rural-urban disparities. However, its urban-centric approach risks overlooking deep-rooted socio-economic challenges. To be transformative, the mission must move beyond smart village rhetoric and adopt context-specific, inclusive, and sustainable development strategies.

Illakiya and Prasad (2024) ^[5] results revealed that SPMRM improved employment, skill training, and infrastructure across four Tamil Nadu districts, enhancing rural economic stability. About 87% were highly satisfied with training, 79.7% secured jobs, and 58.8% reported reduced migration due to better infrastructure. While Phase I and II showed stronger policy impact, gaps persist in healthcare (47.5% dissatisfaction) and sanitation (19.8%). Addressing these through better health services, resource equity, and sustained infrastructure maintenance is essential for long-term rural development.

Rajan (2023) ^[10] paper revealed that SPMRM aims to create thriving rural clusters that support economic growth and improved living conditions, making migration a choice rather than a necessity. Migration robustness as seen post-COVID-19 is as it was intended by SPMRM in that specific area, calling for supportive and adaptable policies.

History

PURA 1.0

The precursor to SPMRM was PURA (Provision of Urban Amenities to Rural Areas), proposed by Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam in 2003 and discussed in Target 3 billion. PURA aimed to reduce rural-urban migration by providing urban amenities and livelihoods through PPP-based holistic development around rural growth centres. However, the initial PURA model was considered unsuccessful.

PURA 2.0

In 2012, Rural Development Minister Jairam Ramesh relaunched the scheme with a focus on water supply, sanitation and physical infrastructure, shifting away from the earlier emphasis on knowledge connectivity.

Research Methodology

This paper is based on secondary data collected from authentic websites, journals, e-papers and articles.

Vision

The vision statement is "Development of a cluster of villages that preserve and nurture the essence of rural community life with focus on equity and inclusiveness without compromising with the facilities perceived to be essentially urban in nature, thus creating a cluster of "Rurban villages".

Aim of the Rurban mission

The aim of SPMRM is to create 300 rural growth clusters across the country. In the first phase, 100 clusters will be taken up, thereafter more clusters will be identified based on the progress of the scheme.

Objectives of the Rurban mission

1. To stimulate local economic development
2. To enhance basic services to rural areas
3. To create well planned Rurban clusters

Outcomes of the mission

The larger outcomes envisaged under this Mission are

- Bridging the rural-urban divide-viz: economic, technological and those related to facilities and services.
- Stimulating local economic development with emphasis on reduction of poverty and unemployment in rural areas.
- Spreading development in the region and attracting investment in rural areas

Rurban Explained

Rurban clusters consist of geographically connected rural settlements with growth potential and economic advantages. These clusters are identified based on proximity, economic drivers, and locational benefits, and once developed, are termed Rurban.

Need for Rurban Clusters

Rising rural-to-urban migration due to better infrastructure, education, and employment opportunities necessitates rural development. Clusters of villages with shared growth potential are targeted to provide urban-like amenities locally.

Cluster Characteristics

• Population range

25,000–50,000 in plains or coastal regions
5,000–15,000 in hilly, desert, or tribal areas

Cluster Selection Criteria

Scientific evaluation at district and village levels based on: Demographics, Economic indicators, Land value, Tourism/pilgrimage relevance, On-farm employment trends, Transport corridor impact

Clusters are developed through:

Rurban clusters would be developed by provisioning of training linked to economic activities, developing skills & local entrepreneurship and by providing necessary infrastructure amenities. The Mission recommends fourteen desirable components for an ideal Rurban cluster. While selecting Rurban clusters, states should identify a large village or gram panchayat with strong growth potential often a block headquarters or census town. Surrounding geographically contiguous villages within a 5-10km radius (adjusted for local density and geography) are then grouped to form the cluster.

Funding

1. Critical Gap Funding (CGF)

- Funds released by the Ministry to State Government, then deposited in a dedicated SNA account.
- Distributed in three instalments over three years, as per approved project schedule.
- SNA transfers funds to a district-level account; the District Collector uses it for ICAP components.
- State/Gram Panchayat may add additional funds via this account.

2. Convergence Fund

- Funds from Central, State or sponsored schemes follow their own guidelines and are not routed through dedicated Rurban accounts.

Fund Release Pattern

- ₹35 lakhs per cluster for ICAP preparation (adjusted from 2% administrative budget).
- CGF released in three stages
- 30% → post ICAP approval

- 30% → after DPR approval and start of construction
- 40% → after utilization certificate (GFR compliance) and Ministry field visit
- From the third instalment, State Nodal Agency gives 35% to the project immediately, and 5% after full construction.
- SNA (State Nodal Agency) conducts site verification, and a completion report is submitted to the Ministry.

Key features

- NRM through development of Rurban growth clusters aims at catalyzing overall regional growth for simultaneously benefiting the rural as well as urban areas of the country.
- Strengthening of rural areas and de-burdening the urban areas.
- Balanced regional development and growth of the country by simultaneously benefiting the rural as well as urban areas of the institutional arrange both at the State and Centre in order to ensure smooth implementation of the mission.
- The State Governments would deny the cluster which have latent potential for growth in accordance with the Framework for Implementation prepared by the Union Ministry of Rural Development
- States government will prepare Integrated Cluster Action Plans for Rurban Clusters. It will be comprehensive plan documents detailing out the strategy for the cluster development. The clusters will be geographically contiguous Gram Panchayats with different population and follow administrative convergence units of Gram Panchayat.
- Population Requirements
 1. Coastal and plain areas must have population of about 25000 to 50000
 2. Hill, desert or tribal areas must have 3000 to 15000. There will be a separate approach for selection of clusters in Tribal and Non-Tribal Districts.

Rurban starts work on according to 4 basic amenities

- Basic amenities
- Social amenities
- Economic amenities
- Digital amenities
- These amenities cover the 14 components of Rurban Mission

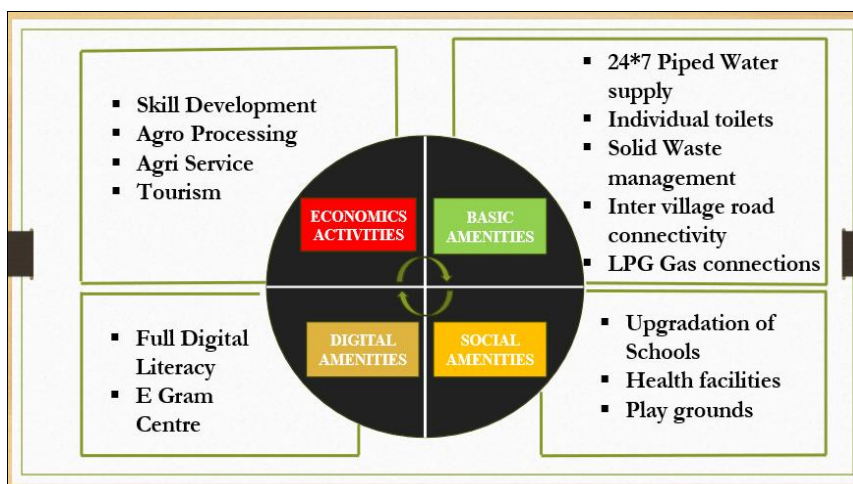


Fig 1: depicts the different amenities covered by the mission under 4 basic amenities

Role of States

- The State Government selects the clusters in alignment with the Protocol for Implementation generated by the MoRD.
- The MoRD is using a scientific approach to cluster selection, which entails an objective examination of the influence of transportation corridors, tourism and pilgrimage, economy, and demography at the district, subdistrict, and village levels.

Advantages

- **Enhance connectivity:** By enhancing communication and physical connectivity, it will close the gap between rural and urban areas.
- **Promote reverse migration:** Reverse migration will be promoted due to the wealth of metropolitan facilities and employment opportunities.
- **Increased Purchasing Power:** Due to more work opportunities, rural inhabitants' purchasing power will increase.
- **Reap the demographic dividend:** By giving rural residents access to skill development centers, it will help use India's demographic dividend.
- **Strengthen the smart cities:** Since the redesigned smart cities won't have to deal with the burden of rural migration, the Smart Cities Mission will be strengthened.

Limitations

- **Demands excellent coordination:** Collaboration between the Union Rural Development Ministry, state governments, and the corporate sector will be necessary for success.
- **An increase in the cost of operations:** The Private Public Partnership (PPP) idea will be used to create urban clusters.

Current scenario of the mission

- However, this will lead to higher operating expenses.
- **In the northeast, it won't work:** In regions like J&K and the Northeast that struggle with law and order, private companies could be reluctant to collaborate with the government to create urban clusters.

Barriers of the mission

- **Problems with the Critical Gap Fund (CGF):** Project implementation is hampered by inadequate and delayed funding. States also struggle with optimal usage because of capacity constraints and ambiguous regulations.
- **Limited Role of PRIs:** Due to their limited capabilities and ambiguous roles, which diminish local ownership and decentralized planning, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) are frequently neglected.
- **Convergence Challenges:** It is challenging to merge programs like MGNREGA, PMGSY, and NRLM due to poor departmental coordination, misplaced goals, and bureaucratic delays.
- **Cluster Identification:** Some clusters are selected based on political considerations rather than developmental needs, and selection frequently lacks consistent criteria and community input.
- **Observation and Assessment:** Transparency and performance reviews are hampered by inefficient tracking methods, underutilized management information systems, and a dearth of third-party evaluations.
- **Implementation Delays:** Procurement hold-ups, land disputes, and a lack of qualified personnel at the state and cluster levels are all contributing factors to the slow development.
- **Low Rates of Community Involvement:** Project sustainability and local relevance are impacted by low public knowledge and engagement.

Table 1: Statistics of current progress of Rurban mission

S. No.	Components	Figures
1.	Total Clusters	300
2.	Approved Clusters	297
3.	Approved ICAP	291
4.	Approved DPRs	282
5.	Districts Covered	254
6.	GP Covered	2825
7.	Total Approved Investment (In Cr)	27600.11
8.	Total Expenditure (In Cr.)	18242.20
9.	Convergence Investment (In Cr.)	20851.98
10.	Convergence Expenditure (In Cr.)	14413.1
11.	CGF Investment (In Cr.)	6748.13
12.	CGF Expenditure (In Cr)	3829.05
13.	Total No of Works (DPR)	75999
14.	Total Works Approved	61597
15.	Total Works Under Approval	14402
16.	Completed Works	45356
17.	Ongoing Works	9213
18.	Geotagged Works	52246

From the table 1, it can be concluded there is significant progress in cluster development, with 297 of 300 clusters granted approval and 291 ICAPs sanctioned, covering 254 districts and 2,825 GPs. Significant convergence financing (₹20,851.98 crore; expenditure ₹14,413.10 crore) and CGF allocation (₹6,748.13 crore; expenditure ₹3,829.05 crore) have supported ₹18,242.20 crore of the approved total

investment of ₹27,600.11 crore. 61,597 of the 75,999 identified works have been approved, 45,356 have been finished, 9,213 are still in process, and 52,246 have been geotagged. This shows significant implementation progress with potential to increase CGF use and speed up outstanding approvals.

Table 2: Distribution of top five performing states of SPMRM

S. No.	State Name	Score	Rank
1	Tamil Nadu	96.66	1
2	Mizoram	93.96	2
3	Uttar Pradesh	92.97	3
4	Telangana	92.77	4
5	Karnataka	88.47	5

From the table 2 it can be observed that Tamil Nadu achieved the first rank with 96.66 per cent, followed by Mizoram in second position with 93.96 per cent and Uttar Pradesh in the third place with 92.97. per cent Telangana

ranked 4th with a score of 92.77 per cent, while Karnataka was ranked fifth with 88.47 per cent .The top-performing states are highlighted in this ranking according to their total scores.

Table 3: Distribution of top five performing clusters of SPMRM

S. No.	Cluster name	Score	Rank
1	Aibawk (Mizoram, Aizwal)	99.90	1
2	Dasna dehat (Uttar Pradesh, Ghaziabad)	99.83	2
3	Kovilpappagudi (Tamil Nadu, Madurai)	99.74	3
4	Suthamalli (Tamil Nadu, Tirunelveli)	99.57	4
5.	Vaniyangudi (Tamil Nadu, Sivaganga)	99.10	5

From the table 3, we can conclude that Aibawk (Mizoram) landed in first with 99.90, per cent closely followed by the town of Dasna Dehat (Uttar Pradesh) at 99.83 per cent. Tamil Nadu's Kovilpappagudi scored in third with of 99.74, per cent, and Tamil Nadu's Suthamalli and Vaniyangudi came in fourth and fifth, respectively, with the 99.57 per cent and 99.10 per cent.

Conclusion

The National Rurban Mission (NRuM) is a key initiative aimed at minimizing India's rural-urban divide by creating rural clusters with urban-like facilities, economic opportunities, and improved infrastructure. Significant advancements in cluster approvals, infrastructure development, skill training, and decreased migration are reflected in its progress. There are still issues with funding delays, poor community involvement, limited panchayat involvement, and shortages in health and sanitation services, even though the mission boosts regional growth. Ensuring sustainability requires strengthening convergence, enhancing transparency, and empowering local governance. NRuM can promote long-term, equitable, and inclusive rural development if it is implemented well.

Way forward

To strengthen the Shyama Prasad Mukherji Rurban Mission, an even more decentralized and collaborative strategy is essential. Local ownership can be increased by giving Panchayati Raj Institutions more decision-making power and capacity-building assistance. Better resource use will be ensured by improved convergence mechanisms with precise rules and deadlines across programs. Transparency and accountability can be increased by fortifying the CGF,

implementing real-time monitoring systems, and carrying out frequent third-party evaluations. Finally, but just as importantly, long-term sustainability and local relevance of interventions depend on ongoing community engagement and awareness efforts.

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