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Providing transparency in rural electrification



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The GARV app puts pressure on State governments for timely and quality delivery

“I am going to turn everything into an app and I am going to allow people to monitor daily what work we are doing, what work States are doing” – Piyush Goyal, March 23, 2016 at the Power Focus Summit

Rural electrification has been an enduring challenge for successive governments. Given India’s federal structure, States provide last-mile connectivity which includes providing access to and distributing electricity, and maintaining infrastructure, while the Central government provides policy and financial support.

However, un-electrified villages present an enormous challenge as they are often located in inaccessible or left-wing extremism-affected areas. Over the last three years, there has been a rapid decline in the pace of rural electrification to only 5,189 villages. Several States, particularly in eastern India, have seen even lower levels of electrification. For instance, in these three years, Uttar Pradesh electrified just 64 villages against the 1,518 that were sanctioned while Bihar electrified only 1,248 villages against the 9,246 that were sanctioned. The slow pace meant that this task would require more than a decade. Due to such tardy performance in the States, the National Democratic Alliance government launched the Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Gram Jyoti Yojana (DDUGJY) to ensure rapid electrification, feeder separation, and strengthening of rural distribution infrastructure. It is necessary to monitor progress intensively for smooth and fast implementation of electrification.

On August 15, 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that all the remaining villages would be electrified within 1,000 days. Based on Census 2011, States had provided a list of 18,452 un-electrified villages as on April 1, 2015. To transparently monitor the process, the Central government, in November 2015, appointed 309 young and passionate Grameen Vidyut Abhiyantas (GVAs or rural electrification engineers) from the same areas. Reports by these GVAs are shared through the GARV (Grameen Vidyutikaran) app (<http://garv.gov.in>) with officials as well as the public. It puts pressure on State governments for timely and quality delivery.

Transparent monitoring system

Transparency in rural electrification brought to fore a number of issues which were traditionally swept under the rug. Villages are electrified as per the old 10 per cent household connectivity criterion, but the Central government aims at connecting 100 per cent households of the 18,452 villages. Habitations with less than 100 people (Dhanis, Majalas, Tolas, etc.) outside revenue villages were not even included earlier, but are now electrified. Prior to GVAs, only data provided by the States was available, which in many cases does not represent ground reality. GVAs provide a verification mechanism in a bold, transparent, and reliable manner. We are delighted that the media is taking an interest in tracking rural electrification.

On December 10, 2015, media reports highlighted discrepancies in some State data and it was decided that post January 1, 2016, GVA verification would be mandatory for electrified villages so that States provide accurate data. Thus GVAs have the huge task of verifying all the

old data generated by the State governments since April 1, 2015, and public and media participation was solicited for scrutiny. This will ensure highest degree of probity and accountability in the system.

Articles on rural electrification published in *The Hindu* on March 26 (“On paper, electrified villages — in reality, darkness” and “Here, the light goes out of their lives at sunset”) fulfil this very purpose and are a step towards bringing accountability. Though these articles aim to highlight certain shortcomings in rural electrification, they are themselves outcomes of a transparent monitoring system adopted by the Centre.

Analysing specific cases

Let’s look at specific cases. Haldu Khata in Uttar Pradesh was declared electrified by the U.P. government on November 6, 2015 but during a visit by GVAs on Jan 1, 2016, no works of grid extension were found in the village. As an interim arrangement, the village stands electrified with solar power. Dimatala in Assam was declared electrified by the State on September 27, 2015 and was confirmed by GVAs. But on January 18, 2016, a visit of GVAs found that the distribution transformer was damaged. The State was directed to take corrective action. Kadam Jheriya in Chhattisgarh was declared electrified by the State on October 9, 2015 and was confirmed by GVAs. Pagara Buzurg in Madhya Pradesh was declared electrified on September 28, 2015 and was confirmed through a GVA visit. However, a GVA visit on March 22, 2016 revealed that existing infrastructure has been stolen; this remains the responsibility of the State. Panalomali, Kusadangar, Patyetapali in Odisha, and Sunwara in M.P. were declared electrified by the States on November 27, 2015; December 4, 2015; November 12, 2015; and September 28, 2015 respectively. GVAs have recorded these as uninhabited villages, but State governments have not declared them so. Birni in Jharkhand was declared electrified by the State on October 15, 2015. A GVA visit on March 23, 2016 confirmed that village works are complete, but line charging remains and is being expedited.

Additionally, 300 villages were declared electrified by State governments but not verified by GVAs. They were declared electrified before GVAs joined. GVAs are verifying all the villages and will complete the process by March 31, 2016.

The articles mention that 342 villages were marked as not electrified by GVAs but are shown as electrified. We are not sure how the figure has been arrived at by the reporter, but State governments’ data remains our primary reference complemented by field verification. There are indeed some villages such as Firozpur Darga, Fajalpur Habitat in U.P., and Bukanari in Bihar which were declared electrified on September 30, 2015 by U.P. and on September 29, 2015 by Bihar, but found un-electrified during GVA visits. State governments have been requested to reconfirm the basis of their data and take corrective action. The underlying focus remains transparency. If the purpose was to hide the status of the villages, even the “not electrified as per GVA” status will not show on the app.

The app itself highlights that 3,604 villages were found electrified during the survey by GVAs. Instead of the data first coming from States, GVAs directly captured the electrification data on the app with subsequent State government confirmation. These villages were electrified before deployment of GVAs.

Despite our commitment during meetings in the third week of March to provide precise field data after the Holi vacations, the reporter went ahead with the articles, making a case for State governments to improve data accuracy and quality.

Power Minister Piyush Goyal said on March 22: “I urge all to monitor the implementation of rural electrification carried out by States to support the efforts of the Central government to bring in transparency and ensure that proper quality is maintained and works are completed on time.” Also on multiple occasions, the Minister has asked the public and the media to scrutinise rural electrification work of States and ask for accountability. With enhanced funds, pro-people guidelines, constant monitoring and speedy delivery, Central government has embarked on a time-bound mission not only to electrify 18,452 villages much before the scheduled time but also to take it to the next level to provide connectivity to all the households in these villages and meet the ultimate goal of 24X7 power for all.

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