RURBAN MISSION:
A STUDY OF SMART
VILLAGES IN THE MAKING

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Abstract

The Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, launched Shyam Prasad Mukherji Rurban Mission (SPMRM), known as the National Rurban Mission (NRuM), with the idea of stimulating local economic development, enhancing basic services, and creating well planned Rurban clusters in potential growth centres in various States of India. This is a mission with several unique elements, such as nudging States to use programme convergence as a strategy to leverage economic drivers identified in a given cluster, and fill the gaps, if any, through a critical gap fund. It has been nearly five years since the launching of the mission. There are not many studies on how National Rurban Mission (NRuM) works on the ground. Therefore, this rapid study was conducted in four Rurban clusters in Tamil Nadu and Kerala using qualitative research design, to underscore/highlight issues, and come out with tentative conclusions that can serve as strong hypotheses for a larger study on how the mission works on the ground .

Keywords: Rurban Mission, SPMRM, NRuM, Smart Villages.

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Introduction

The Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India (GoI) launched a mission called Shyam Prasad Mukherji 'Rurban Mission' (SPMRM), popularly known as 'Rurban Mission', in February 2016. The basic presumption was that most of the rural areas in the country are not standalone settlements but part of a cluster of settlements, which are relatively proximate to each other. The National Rurban Mission (NRuM) aims to stimulate local economic development, enhance basic services, and create well-planned Rurban clusters. These clusters selected should illustrate potentials for growth, have economic drivers and derive locational and competitive advantages. These clusters, once developed, would be classified as 'Rurban'.

Development of a cluster of villages that preserve and nurture the essence of rural community life without compromising with the facilities perceived to be essentially urban in nature. Thus, it was conceptualised with a view to developing 'smart villages' in India. The mission has been implemented in almost all the States of India and is in the third phase of implementation. Rurban mission has given a suggestive list of components and schemes that can possibly be converged.

Cluster Action Plans & Projects

Integrated Cluster Action Plan (ICAP) prepared by respective State governments for the identified clusters shall be a vital plan covering the baseline indicating the requirements of the cluster. It also points out the key interventions needed to address these needs and to make the cluster realise its potential. The ICAP will also provide the area delineated for the cluster, approximate costs for development, and the estimated resource plan to meet the cost through the convergence of various schemes.

The ICAP prepared for the cluster will make clear: (1) A strategy for the cluster integrating the vision for each Gram Panchayat in the cluster, (2) The desired components for the cluster, (3) The resources to be converged under various Central Sector, Centrally Sponsored and State Sector schemes, and (4) The Critical Gap Funding (CGF) required for the cluster. There is also an institutional framework that envisages the engagement of key stakeholders at the national, State, district and Gram Panchayat levels.

Objectives:

1. To assess the cluster identification strategy adopted by the States

2. To ascertain the quality of the ICAPs prepared, and assess the relevance of growth drivers focussed on Rurban Clusters

3. To discover the range of and pragmatism behind the convergence of various schemes brought about in the ICAPs

4. To study the institutional set-up and operational arrangement for programme implementation

5. To come out with tentative findings and conclusions that can serve as strong hypotheses for a large-scale quantitative study of the outcomes of the mission.

Research Design

This is a 'formative research' conducted to understand the working of Rurban Mission on the ground. The outcome of this is expected to feed into designing a large-scale scientific study on the performance of the mission. Basically, this is a qualitative study. The prime methods used are studying each cluster as a case through direct observation, group interviews and chain of interviews - supported by a desk review of documents from the four clusters under study.

The idea was to go for exploratory sequential design, i.e., we begin with qualitative data collection and analysis, which would help build a quantitative data collection and analysis procedure. It implies that we used mixed methods research procedure sequentially in two stages. Initially, we went for qualitative data collection with a case

study design. Each cluster was studied as an independent case. In Stage 2, we plan to conduct a quantitative study using a mixed methods approach. In other words, case studies explored each intervention in-depth. The synthesis is drawn from all four cases inductively, and the tentative findings and conclusions are presented here. Thus,

Stage 1 helped clarify the problem statement, identify variables and throw light on some plausible and bold hypotheses for testing. In stage 2, we are planning to go for a quantitative study using mixed methods approach, which will be taken up as a separate study (not included in the scope of this paper).

Figure 1

The Conceptual Framework of Rurban Mission
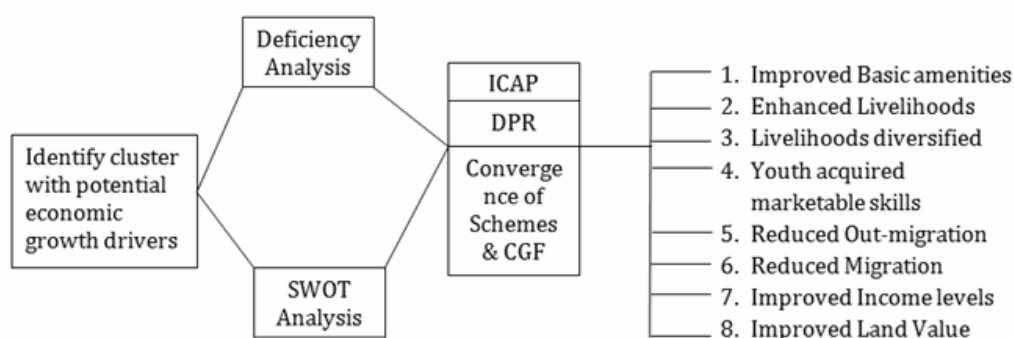
Study Area & Sampling: Four clusters were purposively chosen to conduct this rapid study without spending much time for travelling. Four clusters – two from Tamil Nadu, viz. Velayuthampalayam Cluster in Tirupur and Madukkarai Cluster in Coimbatore; and two from Kerala, viz. Mangattidamin Kottayam cluster and Aryanad in Vellanad Cluster – were identified for this study. Identification of the two States was purely based on travel proximity.

Moreover, the findings of this study at Stage 1 helped draw tentative conclusions to formulate a hypothesis for an in-depth quantitative analysis. Neither the findings nor the conclusions can be generalised for other States/clusters. The findings would be treated as pointers to develop a hypothesis in a given direction.

Data – Sources and Tools: A thorough desk review of ICAPs/Detailed Project Reports (DPRs) of all the clusters under study were made in order to get a critical view of the SWOT analysis conducted, deficiency analysis made, and the

vision developed for the cluster vis-a-vis the schemes converged. In the four clusters, responses were inducted until the study team reached saturation point in data collection through a chain of interviews and direct observation of all the Gram Panchayats in the clusters. A checklist for semi-structured interviews and an observation checklist were used. This study covered Rurban Clusters identified and developed during Phase-1 of the Rurban Mission. It covers only non-tribal clusters. For want of time, tribal clusters were not studied.

Tentative Findings and Conclusion

The Concept of Rurban Mission: The officials as well as elected representatives from all the Rurban Clusters under study involved in Rurban Mission were unilaterally of the opinion that the concept of mission is commendable. The reasons for their giving this opinion are: (i) convergence of schemes/ programmes as a fond wish is found in many policy papers and the implementation framework. It is in the Rurban Mission that the elements of

practicability, coupled with incentives for States and the Panchayats to think in terms of convergence have been introduced perhaps for the first time.

Cluster Identification: One of the important criteria followed in cluster identification under Rurban Mission is that a cluster must cover a population of 25,000 – 50,000 in plain areas. This has necessitated the District Administration (DPMU & CDMU) to cover too large an area by putting together many Gram Panchayats. Given that the villages to be covered under a particular cluster are too many, works carried out seem too sparse or sporadic. Eventually, the impact created becomes too thin to recognise. This is found especially in Tamil Nadu rather than in Kerala clusters because the Panchayats in Kerala were bigger in size, which necessitated combining two or three Panchayats only. Whereas Tamil Nadu has to bring in five or six Gram Panchayats with nearly 20- 22 habitations to make a cluster, and it was not the case for Kerala. Moreover, the settlement of habitations within a Gram Panchayat is closely knit in Kerala, whereas it has been too scattered in Tamil Nadu. For instance, preparing a combined plan for about 20-22 habitations of Tamil Nadu cluster has been challenging. States must be allowed to go for pragmatic customisation with regard to cluster identification and area delineation.

During the study, it was found that all the four clusters studied (both in Tamil Nadu as well as in Kerala) have multiple advantages such as (i) agriculturally rich; (ii) well-connected by district roads; (iii) proximity to a city centres such as Coimbatore and Tirupur in Tamil Nadu, and Thiruvananthapuram and Kannur in Kerala; and (iv) not too far from airport facility, etc. In some of the clusters, the presence of artisans and skilled workers has been an advantage. For instance, Tirupur in Tamil Nadu and Vellanad-Aryanad GPs in Kerala have high artisan concentration. However, the focus of convergence has been on agro-processing and other common basic infrastructure such as roads and water rather than interventions that might support artisans or livelihoods promotion.

Parameters of Cluster Identification: The idea was to select Gram Panchayats with great growth potential. Rise in land values and high concentration of non-farm population have been given more weightage during the selection of areas where clusters are to be promoted. Accordingly, Panchayats have been put in order. The least developed Gram Panchayats have been left out, and the Panchayats that can be developed as Rurban clusters have been selected from high grade as per the parameters laid by MoRD.

Institutional Framework: The State has taken initiatives to establish an exclusive institutional framework for Rurban Mission, as laid down in the Implementation Framework. Accordingly, in Tamil Nadu as well as in Kerala, it was found that there are State Project Management Units (SPMUs) at the State level, which is an empowered committee. In every district wherever Rurban Clusters have been identified, there are District Project Management Units (DPMUs); and at the Block level, there are Cluster Development Management Units (CDMUs). The CDMUs should play a vital role in the planning and execution/execution monitoring of all the converged schemes. However, it emerged in the discussions with officials that the CDMUs are not as active as the DPMUs or SPMUs are. The idea of CDMU created as an additional institutional layer in between Gram Panchayats and block is new to come to practice. It is viewed more as a 'temporary committee' constituted for convergent planning. The CDMU, as originally contemplated, must ensure the sustainable operation of the cluster. It must make further plans for providing traction by elevating the image of the cluster in such a way that it is widely recognised for what it was promoted as a cluster. This idea has not gained a firm grounding.

Integrated Cluster Action Plan (ICAP): The State Nodal Agencies prepare the ICAPs for each cluster. The inputs required for preparing this plan are provided by the designated State Technical Support agencies nominated/identified either by the Rurban Mission or by the State governments. Currently, the Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA) is giving technical support to

Mangattidam and Kottayam clusters, and the College of Engineering Thiruvananthapuram is providing technical support to Vellanad and Aryanad clusters. A similar arrangement was in place in Tamil Nadu also.

A systematic process has been adopted for preparing ICAP, as reported. First, they started with an orientation on NRuM and the idea behind the programme. Gram Panchayats are identified as clusters based on accepted criteria. The cluster profile has been presented to all the elected representatives, the officials from departments, and the agencies involved in preparing the cluster action plan. Deficiency in the cluster has been discussed, and schemes that require converging to overcome the deficiencies have been identified. The PRI members, village-level functionaries, community leaders, NRuM representatives, Town Planning representatives, representatives from State Nodal Agency, and all the relevant departments that ought to have participated in the convergence planning were present in these exercises.

Vision: Although all the clusters are called Agriculture and Agro-processing clusters, they have identified varied deficiencies and have developed different visions. Although Kerala is the State where we find maximum convergent planning has taken place, the clarity of the vision is questionable, especially in the case of Kerala. Kerala clusters have identified a wish list of what important components are to be included in the vision of the cluster. Secondly, the Kerala clusters have developed statements that make little sense, such as attaining self-sufficiency, satisfactory economic pursuits, and happy life. The vision developed by Tamil Nadu clusters - both at Tirupur and Coimbatore - is surprisingly one and the same word for word. The focus seems to have been on converging schemes to reach 70 per cent under convergence, without a focus on choosing schemes in alignment with the vision and proper direction. What seems to have remained on the top of the mind is converging schemes from various departments, rather than paying attention to the deficiencies identified, the inference from SWOT

analysis, and the vision developed for the cluster. The SWOT and deficiency analyses should have provided the vision for the cluster to prepare a fitting ICAP. This is found to be a missing element in the planning stage.

Deficiency Analysis: The deficiency analysis from Tamil Nadu Clusters has shown the following list from high-priority to low-priority in that order: Citizen Service Centre, skill development, drinking water supply, digital literacy, healthcare and so on. The Kerala clusters have gone straight away to identify areas of priority in the order given below: street drains, skilling, inter-village connectivity, water supply, water conservation, school up-gradation and so on.

Convergence of Schemes: Tamil Nadu clusters have managed to converge seven or eight department schemes only, whereas the Kerala clusters have done extremely well by bringing in schemes from more than 10-12 departments of the Central and State governments. In Kerala, the highest concentration has been on village streets, drinking water supply, water conservation, and upgradation of primary schools. In addition, Kerala has brought in additionality in terms of beneficiary contribution, CSR funds, and GP's own source revenue. In Tamil Nadu, the focus has been on rural water supply, solar application, smart schools, and skilling. All the four clusters – both in Tamil Nadu and Kerala – have assembled schemes worth Rs.70 crore each to become eligible to claim Rs.30 crore CGF. They have not fallen short.

Incentive: The Critical Gap Fund (CGF) Rs.30 crore given under the Rurban Mission has served as a very good incentive for the State government and the District Administration to think in terms of convergence with other departments and programmes. It has moved them off their seats and made them approach nodal officers of other schemes and heads of other departments. The ICAPs prepared, and the budget perceptibly reveals that the District Administration has prepared ICAP that will enable bringing in the maximum CGF that a cluster is eligible to claim under the Mission. Therefore, CGF has served as the prime mover of the Rurban Mission. In the

opinion of the scheme implementing officials, convergence is largely happening for the first time in the development history of this country.

Utilisation of CGF: An analysis of 'the type of activity' in which CGF has been much used revealed the following. Tamil Nadu clusters have mostly used it for agri-services processing such as nursery raising, agri-clinics, sericulture units, millet processing, etc. In Kerala, it is used for inter-village connectivity, access to village streets, setting up biogas and waste incineration units, geriatric care, rehabilitation of differently-abled persons, setting up rural markets, playgrounds and recreation facilities, etc.

Work Identification: The CGF is capped at 30 per cent of the capital cost or Rs.30 crore, whichever is lesser (in the case of plain areas). This has made the CDMU to be fixated on the overall budget they are supposed to arrive at. The thinking has been about being within the budget rather than holding a well-thought-out vision for a Cluster and determining the requirement for a cluster to offer the traction or power. This is a mindset and this argument is based on the premise that if the officials had upheld only 'the vision of the cluster' while going for convergence. In such a case, the total budget could have crossed Rs.100 crore. This means more schemes would have come under convergence, even though the CGF has a ceiling, no matter what the convergence adds up to. Thus, the fixated mindset did not allow the officials to put in extra effort to go beyond what was procedurally sufficient.

This mindset should have been expected, and addressed during the training of DPMU/CDMUs. It has, in a way, limited the convergence possibilities. In other words, they (CDMU) were free to go beyond Rs.100 crore budget bearing in view what lies beyond the CGF would be raised through converging with more departments/programmes. This scenario would have given the CDMU the stimulant required to promote a cluster the way NRuM envisaged. But, the CDMU/DDMU has focused on becoming eligible to make full claim of the CGF money, i.e., Rs.30 crore. The 14 desirable components recommended under the mission guidelines have been meticulously followed in determining the works to be taken up, rather than paying attention to if all the works taken up provide the traction required for promoting an agri-cluster, which is stated as the original vision for the cluster.

Growth Drivers: A careful analysis of the strength identified in all the clusters under study; the vision developed for each of the clusters; and the deficiencies that were supposed to be holding the economic potentials of these clusters and the types of schemes converged, and the activities taken up seem to be in disarray. Preparation of ICAP, DPRs, and the subsequent changes approved in DPRs at a later stage, etc., require serious revisiting. This is one of the serious lacunas, except that it has provided additional basic infrastructure in the GPs of the cluster. Other essential mandates of the mission, such as stimulating local economic development, livelihoods enhancement and diversification flourishing, youth acquiring skills that are marketable within the clusters, reduction in/ slowing down of out-migration/distress migration, etc., are not perceptible. Clearly, these are the desired ultimate situation in Rurban Clusters. These have to go into hypotheses in an in-depth study for a serious exploration in the second stage of this study.

Maintenance: No separate fund is allocated for the project's operation and maintenance, leaving extra tasks on the Panchayat to maintain various projects sustainably. Although maintenance of the facilities is mentioned in the NRuM Guidelines, there is no clear-cut strategy or roadmap as to how it could be done. Therefore, the issue of maintenance of the facilities created remains a big question like in any other rural development scheme meant for asset creation.

Progress Monitoring: There is a monthly review meeting of stakeholders with the District Collector, Project Director, etc. Also, the Additional Development Commissioner used to conduct Block-wise and Panchayat-wise meetings to review the progress. There is a demand for a technical officer to look after the design and implementation of

infrastructure components in the cluster as the local self-government department engineer has charge of more than one Gram Panchayat. However, once the project implementation got completed, there is no further review of the use or maintenance of the assets created.

Projects failed to take off: It was also found that some of the projects had been dropped during the implementation due to the following reasons.

- Lack of Public/Panchayat Land: Due to high land value, it became difficult to purchase the land for asset creation.

- School bus and ambulance for hospitals have been proposed in DPR. But, later, it was found that there was no provision for paying the driver's salary. So, these plans had to be dropped.

Tentative Conclusion

The strategy adopted by the NRuM to make the States/districts think and initiate convergence-in-action has really worked. Convergence of departments and programmes has taken place. The NRuM deserves to be credited for being the first programme that demonstrated convergence in planning, as well as on the ground. However, incongruity between the direction of change desired in a cluster and the types of schemes converged coupled with sparse/sporadic nature of interventions undertaken from various departments do not render perceptible change as envisaged by the mission for economic activities to take an upward spiral. The study has the following suggestions to make.

Implicit Suggestions

1. The 30 per cent Critical Gap Fund (CGF) for every cluster must be continued, as it serves as the prime mover of this programme amongst the State and District Administrations. Two important attractions that Gram Panchayats (clusters) find in Rurban Mission are: (i) the geospatial planning, and (ii) the comfort of being able to plan for activities/interventions that no existing schemes can fund because of the provision in CGF to cover such investments/expenditures. Therefore, the concept of CGF under NRuM

must be continued.

2. The location of habitations is too widespread when it comes to combining 5-6 Gram Panchayats to make one cluster. Consequently, after planned interventions got implemented, it becomes difficult to recognise the effect of convergence. The density of schemes implemented is too thin to recognise. Therefore, States must be allowed to go for pragmatic customisation with regard to cluster identification and area delineation.

3. The NRuM primarily envisages livelihoods promotion and creating infrastructure attendant to livelihoods promotion. This is one of the key features of NRuM. In ICAPs/DPRs, the components under common basic infrastructure creation are found to be on the higher side, rather than the expenditure on agriculture promotion, agro-processing or livelihoods enhancement/diversification. In this regard, attention must be paid during the scrutiny of Cluster Action Plans in the phases to come.

4. Cluster Development and Management Unit (CDMU) is viewed more as a 'temporary committee' constituted for the purpose of convergent planning. Once the planning exercise is over, and the ICAP got approved, the CDMU becomes silent or non-existent in the clusters. The CDMU, as originally contemplated, must ensure sustainable operation of the cluster and involve in progress monitoring. Further, it must make further plans for providing traction by elevating the image of the cluster in such a way that it is widely recognised for what it was promoted as a cluster. This idea has not gained a firm grounding. CDMU, as an institution, requires further orientation/training on the role and significance of the NRuM. There must be incentive mechanisms worked out, such as a 'performance grant' to ensure sustained functioning of CDMU.

5. It is suggested that while scrutinising ICAPs and approving DPRs, sufficient attention must be paid to the completeness of the Cluster Action Plan, and the scope for sustainable use of

benefits of the plan to the cluster in question. This suggestion comes in the wake of school buses and ambulances proposed in the DPR got approved, but could not be executed for want of funds for paying driver's salary. The same holds good for projects that require land acquisition. Projects such as recreation facility/ Local Park, RDF (Refuse Derived Fuel) facility from waste management, etc., got sanctioned. But the land required for setting up such facilities could not be obtained for various reasons, including high land price. Such issues must be threshed out while discussing various components in the DPR before they get approved.

6. Alcoholism and domestic violence act as big hurdles standing in the way of livelihoods diversification in Kerala clusters. However, no action plan/project was found to address such issues so that livelihoods get on smoothly. It was identified during deficiency analysis and was also reported as a weakness in SWOT analysis. But, no countervailing/remedial intervention plan was found in the plan. The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment has schemes in order to address such issues. Such schemes, which are missing, could have been included in the ICAP.

7. It was reported in the ICAP that Tirupur in Tamil Nadu and Vellanad-Aryanad GPs in Kerala have a high concentration of 'artisans'. However, convergence has focused on agro-processing and other common basic infrastructure such as roads. No single scheme has been brought in as part of convergence so as to enhance/support the artisans in the cluster. This is a missed opportunity in the livelihoods-related intervention.

8. The use and maintenance of assets created are not in the plan. In the context of non-existent CDMUs, maintenance of assets becomes an issue when there is no explicitly stated maintenance arrangement in NRuM that brings in a handful of Gram Panchayats as a cluster. Some of the assets belong to all the 4-5 Gram Panchayats. It implies that every Panchayat is a beneficiary, and every Panchayat is responsible. As no responsibility fixed on any accountable body, the maintenance of assets becomes questionable once the project got implemented. This can, perhaps, be addressed through the 'performance grant' proposed earlier, or through the creation of an exclusive maintenance fund along the lines of Jal Jeevan Mission.

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