

# Roads to Inclusion - Connecting People, Transforming lives in India



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Improved roads have facilitated access to banking services for women in Bodol village in West Bengal. (ADB Photo)

Sericulture farms in India's northeastern state of Assam, are suddenly witnessing a rush of female workers. Improved connectivity of villages is a major reason for this transformation. Women self-help groups (SHGs) involved in sericulture, a major cottage industry in the region, are happy with the new roads built through forest, as these enable them to use bicycle to collect leaves for larvae, saving both time and effort.

"Previously, we used to go on foot on muddy pathways which took our entire day, affecting our productivity," says Namita Bharali from Jorhat region pointing to the network of rural roads built in the state under India's national rural roads program (PMGSY).

"Now, we manage to complete the collection and return home early to utilize the time for other activities," she says. Better connectivity has also enhanced access to improved technologies, skill training and marketing avenues for the SHGs resulting in more income. Women feel progressively empowered, as they are no longer working merely as daily wagers in government-owned farms but are participating in every phase of the value chain from upkeep of larvae to processing of silk thread, weaving, and marketing.

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Dr. Mahate

Moving south along India's east coast, a community health center in a rural pocket of the state of Odisha is cramped with patients. Unfazed by the people and noise around, Dr. Prakash Chand Mahate is calmly attending to the increased rush of patients. "Lives are being saved. Ambulances can now reach the villages where there was no road in the past," he says, testifying to the positive impact of improved connectivity on people's lives in India's rural heartland. "Improved connectivity has resulted in at least 25% reduction in maternal and infant mortality rates due to enhanced access to hospitals while several villages have achieved 100% immunization," says Dr. Mahate.

Such beneficiary testimonies point to the positive socio-economic impacts of improved connectivity. This is what the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) clearly envisaged when the Government of India launched the program in 2000 as part of its poverty

reduction strategy.

Primarily, the program aims to provide connectivity by way of an all-weather road operable through the year to the eligible unconnected habitations in rural areas with a population of 500 persons or more (250 in case of hill states). So far, the program has built over 600,000 kilometers of rural roads across the country connecting over 150,000 habitations.

ADB's own experience in supporting the program since 2003 through cumulative financing assistance of \$2.45 billion corroborates to the gains from improved connectivity. A recent [field assessment](#) of the program's impact in the five states (Assam, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and West Bengal) covered by one of the ADB-supported interventions noted several achievements. These include improvement in school enrollments and access to quality education, improved health outcomes, enhanced women's safety, better access to development programs and enhanced agricultural production as a result of better connectivity. Other impacts are reflected in better access and delivery of development programs such as public distribution system, integrated child development services and midday (free) meal scheme for children in government schools.

Almost 90% of the interviewed households in the assessment testified to these positive impacts.

Gender-specific impacts of the program were especially visible in the case studies and testimonials of beneficiaries. Take the case of the tribal-dominated state of Chhattisgarh where people were apprehensive of sending their daughters to school alone, since there was no bus facility due to poor quality of roads. After road construction, some private operators started providing pick and drop facilities for the students making it convenient, and safe for girls to aspire for higher education.

In tribal villages of Khamhardih and Nayakhda in the state, the program has directly impacted sanitation and hygiene. The cost of constructing toilets has reduced due to the reduced transportation cost of materials. Toilets have transformed lives of women, especially girls. Apart from better health and hygiene, toilets have provided to women greater freedom, security and dignity. In tribal villages of Khamhardih and Nayakhda in the state, the program has directly impacted sanitation and hygiene. The cost of constructing toilets has reduced due to the reduced transportation cost of materials. Toilets have transformed lives of women, especially girls. Apart from better health and hygiene, toilets have provided to women greater freedom, security and dignity.

Women like Rashmi Vishkarma, a young lawyer from Tenipura village in Madhya Pradesh, feel a sense of empowerment as the road built through the village made it possible to pursue her legal practice at district headquarters, 35 km away from her home. "Before the road was built, my family was apprehensive about my safety and did not allow me to work. I had no option but to sit at home for a year after finishing my degree," she says. The new road was a life changer for her and revived her ambitions to be a successful lawyer.

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Rashmi Vishkarma, lawyer

Apart from these direct impacts, the ADB program proactively involved women in project-planning and decision-making process besides promoting women's participation in labor force and employment. Impressive progress is seen on many gender indicators in the gender action plan (GAP). For example, women's participation in transect walks (community consultation for finalizing road alignment) grew up to 36% through sustained sensitization during the design stage. The female work force participation rose to 35% in construction work and 40% in maintenance work in the surveyed areas. About 43% women participated in road safety orientation programs.

Efforts have been made at the institutional level to increase the number of women staff involved in the program. Many project implementation units are recruiting or deploying female junior engineers in the field. This has not only broken traditional gender stereotypes but also promoted female community participation in awareness programs due to the presence of female staff in the field. Women in villages now feel comfortable participating in such meetings, which were mostly male-dominated earlier.

While these efforts will continue to reinforce women participation and empowerment, improved roads have already made one significant contribution – travel is safer, faster and more convenient for women and girls in rural areas.

## Related

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