

Kashmir to Kanyakumari Potholes/Black Holes

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India may have a road network of over 33 lakh km, but its distribution is highly uneven. On the one hand while certain parts of the country boast of modern expressways, there are other parts that are still inaccessible throughout the year. When the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) was launched in 2000, only 60% of India's habitations were connected. In other words, over 3.3 lakh out of 8.49 lakh habitations were not connected by all weather roads. Even in the last seven years, this glaring disparity could not be bridged.

The progress report of PMGSY shows that there has been no significant progress in new road connectivity under the scheme. Against a target of constructing 35,182.15 km of roads in 2006-07, only 20.5% could be achieved in the first seven months of the fiscal. For instance, Arunachal Pradesh, which is expected to achieve a target of 637.5 km in 2006-07, could not construct even a single km up to Oct 2006. J&K could construct a road length of 41.59 km by the end of Oct 2006 against a target of 1059.49 km in the fiscal 2006-07.

Even in the national highways segment, the development does not seem to be equitable. South and West India are dominating the 64,446 km of national highways. South Indian states including Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu top in terms of its share in national highways with total 13,991 km length. West India is a close follower with 12,901 km of national highways running through Goa, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Rajasthan.

The poor development of highways in the north-eastern region is mainly due to lack of law and order. NE, comprising of eight states, has just 6,880 km of national highways. In the NE region law and order problems include extortion rackets, often supported by local political groups, one of the contractors executing road sector project in the north-eastern region said.

"Working in the Northeast region is difficult. It is the responsibility of the employer to provide security to engineers and construction workers in the region,"

Even the road sector funding reflects the regional imbalance. The number of approved projects for 2001-2007 under the Central Road Fund (CRF) reflects that while 1,792 projects have been approved for southern states, only 187 projects have been approved for seven sisters.

Policy makers, however, disagree that there has been any discrimination in distributing funds. They say that fund allocation is always linked with past performance. According to a data, the north eastern region could spend just 32% of the funds allocated to the region for 2006-07 in developing national highways until October. In relation to that north has already spent 46% and west 43.27% of funds allocated to them by the Centre.

According to a senior government official, the success of national highway programmes depends on the support of the state government. "While southern states are quite supportive, contractors face great difficulties in executing projects in the other states, particularly in UP, Bihar, and Jharkhand," an official of NHA said.

There is another school of thought which believes that regional disparities in road infrastructure is reflected in the budget allocation itself. "States with higher budgetary allocation towards road infrastructure, such as Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra could do well due to that," Feedback Ventures' infrastructure division managing director Gopal Sarma said.

India's total road network comprises of 33,13,769 km. Of this, expressways consist of 200 km, national highways 66,590 km, state highways 1,28,000 km, district roads 4,70,000 km, and rural and other roads constitute 26,50,000 km. Roads are an essential indicator of infrastructure development in the country, carrying 80% of passenger and 65% of freight traffic. National highways, though they constitute less than 2% of the road network, carry almost 40% of the road traffic.