

Power drive: on the quest to achieve full electrification

Access to electricity drives the productivity of households, empowers women and enables education and communication. Millions of homes still lack this vital resource in India. And as of April 1, 2015, the official count of unelectrified villages was 18,452. So when Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently announced that [all inhabited villages now enjoy electrification](#), it signalled a significant milestone in the country's development. It is an achievement that will raise aspirations in the remotest districts. Yet, broad-brush statistics conceal severe disparities, including the actual number of households in villages that have power connections, the number of hours they get reliable power, and the per capita power that rural and urban Indians consume. For one, the [existing definition to declare a village electrified](#) is coverage of a mere 10% of households and common facilities such as schools, panchayats and health centres. The claim of electrification pales when viewed against some of these realities. Rural household electrification has a wide range across States, from 47% to 100%. The average hours of power supplied in a day to rural areas in January 2018 ranged from 11.5 in Mizoram, 14.91 in Haryana and 17.72 in Uttar Pradesh to 24 hours in Kerala, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu. These anomalies are often the result of infrastructure deficits and administrative inefficiency and they show that, even with supportive Central schemes, the Power for All 24x7 goal adopted by States and Union Territories with a deadline of April 1, 2019 is far from realistic.

Census data for 2001 and 2011 indicate that the number of rural households that use electricity as their primary source of lighting rose by about 12 percentage points to 55.3%, while in that decade urban households rose five points to 92.7%. The per capita consumption between rural and fast-rising urban India also represents a challenge, since there is a divergence between the two. There are twin challenges to be faced in improving access and equity. To many, the falling cost of renewable, decentralised sources such as solar photovoltaics represents a ready solution for rural India. Yet, the evidence from States such as Maharashtra, which made an early claim to full electrification six years ago relying partly on solar power, shows that theft, damage and lack of technical capacity can pose serious hurdles. The answer may lie in a hybrid solution that ensures continued scaling up of both grid-connected and standalone solar systems in appropriate areas, augmenting conventional sources of electricity, with a clear emphasis on rooftop solutions for cities. Cheaper renewables will enable differential pricing for households in remote areas, a key determinant of wider social benefits of electricity. Rural electrification in India has been a long effort, achieving rapid growth from the Third Plan to the Twelfth Plan, but getting affordable power to every household needs sustained policy support.

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