

Shedding light on Saubhagya: on electrification scheme

The Pradhan Mantri Sahaj Bijli Har Ghar Yojana ('Saubhagya') launched in September, which claims to ensure electrification of all willing households in the country, is too ambitious a project. While it makes grandiose promises to provide a free electricity connection to all willing Below Poverty Line households and to all others on a payment of 500 (which shall be recovered by the power distribution companies/power departments in 10 instalments along with electricity bills), it expects the poor to pay the bills without providing any subsidy to ease their burden. Even to the best of their abilities the poor would often not be in a position to pay regular electricity bills, which in turn could result in disconnection. The government has conveniently overlooked the fact that for the poor in some States, the inability to pay an electricity bill is a big impediment.

This new scheme is just a way of refurbishing the [Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Gram Jyoti Yojana](#) (DDUGJY), the earlier scheme of rural electrification launched in July 2015, which aimed to electrify all un-electrified villages by May 2018.

Power problem — On Saubhagya scheme

Under DDUGJY, the government managed to electrify 14,701 villages while 2,760 villages remain un-electrified; out of these, work is still in progress in a total of 2,611 villages. However, out of the 14,701 villages, only in 8%, i.e. 1,198 villages, do all households have connectivity. Even if we take into consideration the fact that so many villages have been "electrified", the next point of contention is the definition used. According to the definition, a village is considered to be electrified if 10% households have an electricity connection and related basic infrastructure. Furthermore, even in these 10% of households, there is no promise of minimum hours of supply. The question we then need to ask is this: given that 90% of households may not have power supply and of those 10% with electricity not having a regular supply, can we still consider such a village to be electrified in a meaningful way?

The objective of the Saubhagya scheme is to "provide energy access to all by last mile connectivity and electricity connections to all remaining un-electrified households in rural as well as urban areas to achieve universal household electrification in the country." On the face of it, the scheme may only be able to plug the gaps and address the issues of entry barrier, last mile connectivity and release of connections, but it can guarantee neither regular electricity supply nor continuation of those connections in case of non-payment. A free electricity connection may provide some relief as far as the financial burden is concerned. However, expecting poor households to bear the recurring burden of bills as per the prevailing tariff of DISCOMs is unimaginable.

Even if the programme is successful, hypothetically, and all households are provided a connection, there would still be the problem of regular supply. Industry estimates suggest that this scheme would potentially require an additional 28,000 MW and additional energy of about 80,000 million units per annum, which is roughly 7% of India's current installed power capacity. There is a power shortage even at this moment leading to scheduled and unscheduled load shedding, often up to 10 hours or more. The problem is graver still in interior rural India. Considering the huge lapses as far as electricity availability is concerned, managing this additional demand would prove to be challenging. We should also not forget that the provision of providing one-two hours' supply a day is not the same as provision of regular supply.

In the past three years, we have seen a series of policies and promises urging us to ponder over the type of welfare politics India is witnessing. Symbolically, all such attempts have a lot of significance as far as the bid to secure popular support is concerned. However, there has been a

lot of debate in the past over many of the government's policies which it claims to be based on the primary goal of "ushering in development". Nevertheless, it must be a cause of worry that the government has embraced the slogans of welfare politics without being able to deliver substantial and meaningful results. Irrespective of the poor track record as far as meaningful change is concerned, such policies have aided the government in building an image of being people-centric.

Certainly, Saubhagya has some positives such as provision for households outside the reach of grid lines. However, our contention is that the policy has set a standard for itself without enough focus on its capacity to deliver results. The policy statement echoes the commitment to facilitate economic growth and social development, but we still need to ask whether this is another instance of messaging for an electoral purpose.

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