



International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal homepage: www.ijrpr.com ISSN 2582-7421

Bridging the Implementation Gap: An Evaluation of PRAGATI in Resolving Stalled Infrastructure Projects

Dr. Gopesh Sharma

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Public Administration UOR Jaipur
Contact: 7425088012

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.55248/gengpi.07.0926.3030>

ABSTRACT :

Large-scale government-funded projects in India rarely fail due to deficiencies in their design. Rather, they stall due to misaligned timing of approvals, land acquisition, funding and inter-agency decision-making. In March 2015, PRAGATI (Pro-Active Governance and Timely Implementation) was launched to address this implementation gap through a recurring video review process involving the Prime Minister, Union Secretaries, and State Chief Secretaries using data and geospatial images. In this paper, PRAGATI is assessed based upon five evaluation criteria: Relevance, Effectiveness, Efficiency, Accountability, and Sustainability. The assessment draws upon official publications, an Oxford Said Business School case study of PRAGATI, monitoring data from the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) and existing research on project implementation. Evidence suggests a high degree of relevance for PRAGATI and a moderate level of effectiveness. Officials have reported that 2,958 of approximately 3,200 flagged issues were addressed and resolved. Additionally, numerous projects which had been stalled for many years were completed following a PRAGATI review. However, claims regarding efficiency, portfolio-wide impact and long-term viability are considerably less robust. The published figures relating to PRAGATI are self-reported, inconsistently defined and do not include counterfactuals. Furthermore, system-wide indicators of delays demonstrate little clear improvement and PRAGATI reviews occur at a significantly lower frequency than monthly. This paper concludes with recommendations for establishing transparent measures, independently evaluating PRAGATI and developing institutional capacity at lower levels of the bureaucracy

Keywords: PRAGATI; implementation gap; stalled projects; e-governance; cooperative federalism; delivery unit.

1. Introduction

In India, large-scale government-funded projects are known to run late, and official monitoring data supports this claim. The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) monitors central-sector infrastructure projects costing ₹150 crore or more. The MoSPI's report for July 2026 showed that the total estimated cost of 1,775 ongoing projects has increased from an original ₹33.7 lakh crore to a revised ₹37.1 lakh crore, an increase of approximately ₹3.4 lakh crore (Business Standard, 2026a). While the monetary cost is significant, there is also a loss of benefits. For example, when a bridge opens twenty years after it was originally scheduled to open, it represents twenty years of lost connectivity. Prime Minister Narendra Modi raised this concern at the 53rd PRAGATI meeting when he stated that delays in completing projects delay the realization of benefits intended for citizens as well as increase costs (Prime Minister's Office [PMO], 2026).

The primary reason for delays is not usually a lack of technical expertise. Instead, delays typically occur when multiple government agencies need to approve each step in a project's development. A forest clearance from one ministry, land acquisition from a state government, utility relocation by a local government entity, or a contractor dispute being arbitrated are examples of such approval requirements. Since no single department is responsible for all these approvals, there emerge bottlenecks that slow down projects. PRAGATI was developed specifically to address this problem.

PRAGATI was launched on March 25, 2015. It provides a monthly forum for Union Secretaries and State Chief Secretaries to meet virtually with the Prime Minister to report on blockages preventing completion of projects under their purview and provide estimated timelines for removal of these blockages (PMO, 2015). Over the past eleven years, PRAGATI has received widespread praise. Based on available public records, PRAGATI has rarely been evaluated independently. The Government of India presents PRAGATI as an example of successful cooperative federalism. An Oxford University study identified PRAGATI as a model for other developing nations (Dutta & Pandya, 2024). However, the majority of available data on PRAGATI comes from official summaries and one commissioned case study.

This paper examines four questions. What implementation issue did PRAGATI attempt to resolve? What does the existing evidence indicate regarding PRAGATI's impact on stalled projects? To what extent can we rely upon that evidence? And how could the PRAGATI platform be made more

effective and enduring?

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 The implementation gap as a coordination problem

Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) studied a federal job training program in Oakland, California. They found that even though a program had money and political support, it failed due to the need for numerous separate approvals. Each approval requirement represents a potential source of delay or rejection. The more approval requirements a project has, the greater the likelihood of multiple delays occurring simultaneously. In India, there are many such approval requirements for infrastructure projects including environmental and forest approvals, land acquisition, utility relocation, and financial closing. These approval requirements are distributed among various levels of government and ministries. Pritchett, Woolcock and Andrews (2013) provide another perspective. Many developing countries adopt administrative structures that appear modern but lack the processes that enable those structures to function effectively.

2.2 Megaprojects and the reasons for cost overruns

Flyvbjerg, Bruzelius and Rothen Gatter (2003) demonstrated that cost overruns and lower-than-expected returns are typical outcomes for large-scale projects worldwide. Flyvbjerg (2009) subsequently argued that overly optimistic, perhaps strategically misleading, cost estimates at the approval phase led to projects appearing attractive on paper and being approved for construction. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that monitoring during construction will identify some but not all of the delays associated with megaprojects. A fair evaluation of PRAGATI should not assign credit or blame to PRAGATI for all of the difference between original and revised project costs.

2.3 Delivery Units and Apex Review

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, many governments have established small units close to the head of government responsible for monitoring progress on priority initiatives. Gold (2017), who evaluated delivery units in several countries, identified common characteristics among delivery units including a limited number of priorities, regular reporting using data, and frequent meetings with the leader. Gold also observed that the success of delivery units depends largely on the sustained attention of the leader. PRAGATI functions similarly to a delivery unit although PRAGATI does not have an independent organizational structure. Rather, monitoring responsibilities reside with the Cabinet Secretariat while ministries monitor schemes and grievances under PMO supervision (Press Information Bureau [PIB], 2026).

2.4 Technology and Accountability

Heeks (2006) warns that government information systems fail most frequently when they are developed under the assumption that the organization implementing them operates differently than it actually does. When technology supports existing decision-making processes, technology can facilitate improved performance. Bovens (2007) defines accountability as an actor having to explain actions to a forum; that forum having the ability to ask questions and render judgment; and potential consequences resulting from failing to meet commitments. This definition provides a method for testing whether PRAGATI meets this standard. Who constitutes the forum within which explanations occur? What types of questions can be asked by the forum? What happens when commitments are not met?

2.5 Evaluation Criteria

This evaluation utilizes criteria established by the OECD (2019) and incorporates accountability as defined by Bovens. Relevance addresses whether PRAGATI addresses a legitimate and important problem. Effectiveness assesses whether issues identified during PRAGATI sessions were resolved and stalled projects resumed activity. Efficiency assesses how much time at the highest level of government was consumed by PRAGATI activities. Accountability addresses whether a credible forum exists with visible consequences for failing to fulfill commitments and whether external parties can assess PRAGATI's performance. Sustainability assesses whether PRAGATI can continue operating after a particular leader departs office and can integrate seamlessly into a federal system.

3. Methodology

This evaluation is a qualitative document-based evaluation. Five types of sources were used: PMO and PIB releases on PRAGATI's launch, on individual meetings releases; the Saïd Business School case study on PRAGATI; MoSPI monitoring data as summarized in press reports of its monthly

flash reports; reports on PRAGATI's precursor - the Project Monitoring Group (PMG); and peer-reviewed articles/scholarship related to PRAGATI. Official statements are treated as claims to be verified rather than findings. There are limitations to this evaluation. Information on PRAGATI's internal dashboard/meeting minutes is unavailable publicly in the sources reviewed. PMO releases provide only general summaries of each session. MoSPI monitoring data was obtained via news summaries rather than direct access to primary reports.

Furthermore, MoSPI monitoring has now shifted to its PAIMANA portal (MoSPI) which may affect comparability across years. This evaluation does not attempt to estimate a causal effect; judgments regarding what can be supported by evidence are made.

4. Origins and Design of PRAGATI

4.1 Past Initiatives

PRAGATI builds upon two earlier initiatives. The first initiative was SWAGAT (State Wide Attention on Grievances by Application of Technology), launched in Gujarat in April 2003. Citizens could submit grievances online, track those grievances and participate in video conferences with government officials. Grievances screened as serious were escalated to the Chief Minister's desk and complainants had direct access to monthly hearings (PIB, 2026). The second initiative was the Project Monitoring Group (PMG), established in mid-2013 as secretary of the Cabinet Committee on Investments responsible for unblocking stalled projects. By June 2014, PMG reported that it had helped restart activity on 153 projects totalling ₹5.76 lakh crore.

The most common obstacles encountered were environmental and forest clearances (Forbes India, 2014). An article published subsequent to this report quoted the chairman of PMG stating that more than half of the problems experienced with stalled projects stemmed from state-level clearances. He also stated that PMG had documented 407 stalled projects totalling ₹19 lakh crore (Deccan Herald, 2014). These reports demonstrate why a purely central mechanism would be insufficient to address issues preventing completion of projects.

4.2 Architecture

PRAGATI was launched on March 25, 2015 as a three-tier system connecting the PMO, Union Government Secretaries and State Chief Secretaries. It utilizes data management tools along with geospatial applications and video conferencing technology. The Prime Minister is scheduled to conduct a monthly session on a specific Wednesday at 3:30 p.m. using issues selected from databases containing public grievances, ongoing schemes and unresolved projects (PMO, 2015). The first session considered grievances related to provident fund payments/income tax refunds, a highway issue flagged by Uttar Pradesh, clearance for Navi Mumbai Airport raised by Maharashtra and six central projects involving more than a dozen Union Ministries/Thirteen States some of which had permissions pending for years (PMO, 2015). Follow-up occurs through a hierarchical process. Ordinary issues are addressed at ministry level and only complex or high-priority issues are escalated to the apex forum. Following each session, the Cabinet Secretariat tracks projects while ministries address schemes/grievances under PMO supervision (PIB, 2026). Currently PRAGATI interfaces with PM Gati Shakti, PARIVESH Clearance Portal and PM Ref Portal. PRAGATI's scope has expanded beyond infrastructure to include social programs/public service concerns; recent sessions addressed PM SHRI Schools/Agri Stack/Cyber Fraud (PMO, 2025/2026).

4.3 Mechanisms

Underlying PRAGATI four mechanisms can be analysed individually. The first mechanism is attention: when a particular project is brought before the Head of Government officials respond accordingly. The second mechanism is co-presence: Centre/state decision makers meet virtually allowing disputes that previously required months of correspondence to be resolved quickly. The third mechanism is shared evidence: dashboards/satellite/drone imagery reduce opportunities for conflicting accounts of ground-level realities. The fourth mechanism is tracking follow-up: each issue discussed during PRAGATI sessions is assigned an owner/date for resolution.

5. The Evidence on Performance

5.1 Official performance claims

At the 50th meeting on 31 December 2025, the government reported that 377 projects had been reviewed since 2014 and that 2,958 of 3,162 identified issues, around 94 per cent, had been resolved (PMO, 2025). A PIB backgrounder issued in January 2026 gives 382 projects and 2,958 of 3,187 issues, which works out to about 92.8 per cent (PIB, 2026). The resolved count is identical while the base has shifted, which suggests denominators are updated at different times in different documents.

A larger discrepancy concerns scale. Earlier releases put direct reviews at 363 projects worth about ₹19.12 lakh crore by the 45th meeting (PMO, 2024) and at 373 projects worth about ₹20.64 lakh crore at a later one (PMO, 2025). Yet the Prime Minister has said the PRAGATI-led ecosystem has helped accelerate projects worth more than ₹85 lakh crore (PMO, 2025). The public documents do not reconcile the two figures. The larger figure presumably covers a wider universe, but the sources do not say so.

5.2 Case evidence

The PIB backgrounder lists projects that had languished for years before review. The Bogibeel rail-cum-road bridge, conceived in 1997, was inaugurated in 2018 after regular reviews. Navi Mumbai International Airport, conceptualised in 1997, was held up by land acquisition, rehabilitation and multi-agency issues, and its first phase was inaugurated in October 2025. The Bhilai Steel Plant modernisation, approved in 2007, ran nearly fifteen years late over contractual disputes. The Gadarwara and LARA thermal power projects, the Jammu–Udhampur–Srinagar–Baramulla rail link (sanctioned in 1994) and others are described in similar terms. The backgrounder also reports pace changes after review: physical progress on the Khajuri–Wyndhamganj section of NH-75 rose from 44.4 per cent before an August 2024 review to 92.02 per cent, and AIIMS Bibinagar moved from 29 per cent in September 2023 to 57 per cent by the end of 2023–24 (PIB, 2026).

These cases show the kind of block PRAGATI handles well: land, clearances, utilities, inter-agency handoffs and contractual deadlock. They also carry a caution. They were selected by the platform's own publicist, and no list of projects that were reviewed and remained stuck accompanies them. There is a further point about speed. The first PRAGATI session in March 2015 already had the Navi Mumbai airport clearance on its agenda (PMO, 2015), and the first phase opened in October 2025 (PIB, 2026). A decade is either a record of persistent unblocking or a sign of how little an apex forum can do about problems with deep local roots. The evidence does not decide between the two.

5.3 The Oxford case study

Dutta and Pandya (2024), of the Saïd Business School and supported by the Gates Foundation, reported that PRAGATI had reviewed 340 projects worth ₹17.05 lakh crore, about US\$205 billion, by the end of June 2023, and that many had been overdue by three to twenty years (Saïd Business School, 2024). The study profiles eight projects in detail (The Print, 2024). It is valuable for documenting how the mechanism operates when it works. As a case study of leadership, it was not designed to estimate what would have happened to comparable projects outside PRAGATI. Its findings are best read as a documented account of mechanism, not as proof of effect.

6. Assessment

6.1 Relevance

Relevance is PRAGATI's most powerful advantage. PRAGATI addresses the significant problem of late-stage blockages across agencies and levels of government. In addition, Pressman and Wildavsky's theory of compounding clearances (1973) aligns with India's history of project delays. The PMG's observation that many project delays occur due to state-level clearances (Deccan Herald, 2014) validates the need for a mechanism that provides a single point of contact between federal and state governments.

6.2 Effectiveness

The available evidence supports a tentative, possible, and unverified assertion regarding the effectiveness of PRAGATI. PRAGATI's resolution rate of 93 to 94 percent is an indicator of output. However, it does not provide any information regarding how an "issue" is defined, when it is considered "resolved," whether a resolution represents the elimination of an underlying barrier, or how many issues were re-opened. While case studies demonstrate real progress on projects that were stagnant for extended periods, the selection process for these examples is unclear: the PMO selects issues from various databases and it is unclear whether the PMO chooses the most complex cases or the simplest ones.

6.3 Efficiency

The primary resource that is limited in supply is the Prime Minister's time. Monthly meetings were originally planned. Between March 2015 and December 2025, there were approximately 129 months during which fifty meetings took place. On average, there were approximately 4.7 meetings per year, or approximately two-fifths of the originally intended frequency (calculated by author using data from PMO, 2015; PMO, 2025). Each meeting typically addresses only a limited number of projects: five at the 50th meeting, seven at the 51st meeting, and six at the 53rd meeting (PMO, 2025; PMO, 2026; Business Today, 2026). As such, direct review is a restrictive means of addressing project delays. The broader utility of direct review must come from anticipatory actions; i.e., officials clearing issues prior to review because a review might occur. Such "shadow-of-hierarchy" anticipatory

action is plausible and potentially significant; however, it has yet to be empirically verified. Financial efficiency cannot be assessed as financial data related to PRAGATI has yet to be publicly disclosed. Nevertheless, PRAGATI's design does minimize upper-level time through its escalation procedure wherein routine issues are kept at the ministry level while critical issues are reserved for the highest level (PIB, 2026).

6.4 Accountability

PRAGATI represents a powerful entity: the head of government queries secretaries in the presence of their peers. Approximately 500 secretaries and chief secretaries have participated in PRAGATI since 2015 (PMO, 2025). This constitutes strong hierarchical accountability. However, the outcomes resulting from PRAGATI are informal. Sources consulted describe subsequent follow-up and monitoring; however, none of these sources document sanctions, reassignments, or other formal penalties for failing to meet commitments. Public and legislative accountability are less substantial. While PMO releases provide aggregate cost data, sectoral designations, and state designations, project-level minutes, records of actions taken, and historical records of issues resolved do not seem to be made available to outside parties. Thus, outside parties cannot verify assertions made concerning the platform. A mechanism requiring transparency from ministries would enhance its credibility by disclosing greater transparency about itself.

6.5 Sustainability and Federal Balance

There are three concerns that impact the long-term viability of PRAGATI. The first concern relates to reliance on a single office. Gold (2017) indicated that delivery units frequently rise and fall with their political sponsor. The actual frequency of PRAGATI meetings – significantly less than planned – indicates that PRAGATI's meeting schedule is determined by the Prime Minister's calendar. There are indications of institutional strengthening. The Cabinet Secretariat tracks follow-up; at the 50th meeting, the Prime Minister encouraged states to establish PRAGATI-like mechanisms at the chief secretary level; and a monthly state-level review of social sector programs was reported as functioning by the 51st meeting (PMO, 2025; Business Today, 2026). Institutionalization within routine operations will make PRAGATI more difficult to dismantle.

The second concern relates to federal balance. Official documents describe PRAGATI as an example of cooperative federalism because union and state officials participate jointly (PIB, 2026). Joint participation is not equivalent to equal participation. As described by Rao and Singh (2005), due to fiscal and administrative imbalances between union and state governments, a chief secretary called to a meeting chaired by the Prime Minister may perceive this experience as answering to the union executive rather than negotiating as equals. Available evidence, predominantly derived from official and commissioned sources, reveals little regarding how states perceive the forum. PRAGATI does allow for projects identified by state governments (PMO, 2015); reporting how many agenda items originate with states versus with the centre would illustrate whether communication flows in two directions. As many blockages exist at the state level (specifically related to clearances), state-level replication of PRAGATI will be critical for achieving long-term success.

The third concern relates to balancing speed with quality. At the 53rd meeting, it was emphasized that speed should occur simultaneously with quality and that infrastructure should be viewed as an integrated entity rather than as separate components (PMO, 2026). Land disputes, for example, often involve controversy over compensation and legitimacy (Ghatak & Ghosh, 2011). Review meetings can expedite decision-making without resolving these underlying issues. Time pressure imposed from above may encourage agencies to take shortcuts in resettlement or environmental compliance. Although no evidence of such harm was documented, PRAGATI's indicators solely focus on speed; they provide no information regarding post-completion quality or outcomes for impacted communities.

7. Recommendations

i) Standardize and Publish Definitions

Define what constitutes an issue and when it is considered resolved; publish the denominator at each meeting; reconcile project count discrepancies (e.g., 377/382) and financial discrepancies (₹20 lakh crore vs. ₹85 lakh crore); and publish time-to-resolution data and reopened issue data along with resolution rate data.

ii) Independent Evaluation

An organization independent of the PMO (e.g., Comptroller and Auditor General or university research team having access to data) should conduct comparative analyses between reviewed projects and matched control projects, utilizing project-level progress data obtained from MoSPI's monitoring portal.

iii) Open Public Dashboard

Project-level status, ownership information, and next deadline information for reviewed projects would enable legislators, journalists, and citizens to verify official assertions.

iv) Systematically Categorize Root Causes

Categorization of each issue as land, forest, utility, contractual, funding, or state clearance would enable case-by-case problem-solving to evolve into evidence supporting preventative measures at earlier stages (e.g., establishing minimum land-readiness criteria before awarding contracts). Such categorization would address pre-construction optimism identified by Flyvbjerg (2009). The PMG already performs root cause analysis on delayed projects (Invest India, 2022); therefore, this practice can be expanded.

v) Strengthen Institutions below the Apex Level

Establish a minimum meeting frequency; formalize the Cabinet Secretariat's follow-up function; and support state-level PRAGATI units that report upward on a standardized format.

vi) Analyse Quality and Speed

Include post-completion defect rates; resettlement outcomes; and safeguard compliance as indicators reported for reviewed projects.

8. Conclusion

PRAGATI has been designed to address a real problem having high costs. It creates a virtual workspace where relevant people meet to discuss problems, identifies the individuals who should resolve those problems, sets deadlines for resolution of those problems and uses ground-level information to strengthen facts. Case studies of projects which were stalled for many years, and which reported resolution rates of 93-94% for identified problems, indicate that PRAGATI can help make decisions that could not be made through other means for decades. While PRAGATI has received much recognition, the evidence that supports PRAGATI's ability to achieve results is less than the praise it receives. Data officially reported on PRAGATI are self-reported and do not consistently provide information in a way that allows for evaluation. The Oxford Study refers to PRAGATI as a mechanism; however, it does not evaluate PRAGATI's effectiveness. Delay indicators provided by MoSPI do not show significant improvement over time.

However, delay indicators provided by MoSPI are not appropriate for evaluating a system that reviews only a few large-scale projects. Meetings to review the status of PRAGATI related projects are held less often than once per month. Also, PRAGATI's ability to operate depends primarily on the Prime Minister's availability. Accountability is very strong in an upward manner; however, it is weak in an outward manner. In general, PRAGATI can be thought of as a successful coordination mechanism that addresses some of the consequences of inadequate implementation capacity; however, it does not address some of the underlying reasons why implementation capacity may be inadequate. As such, whether PRAGATI continues to exist as a long-term institution or remains as a leader-focused mechanism will depend on decisions made regarding transparency, independent evaluation, and ownership at the state level.

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