

'A new vision for rural transformation'

Focus on safety, inclusion, and community engagement for women'

■ 'Fifth Edition of the India Rural Colloquy 2025' organised by Transform Rural India (TRI) at Indian Institute of Forest Management (IIFM)

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A FULFILLING and secure life is not rooted merely in material wealth, but in the mindful and equitable use of natural resources. Despite being the land of river origins, Madhya Pradesh faces serious water scarcity during summers - a reality that calls for deeper ecological accountability. With this spirit, Minister of Panchayat and Rural Development & Labour for Madhya Pradesh Prahlad Singh Patel addressed the gathering at the Fifth Edition of the India Rural Colloquy, organised by Transform Rural India (TRI) on Friday.

In his address, the Minister emphasised that "while technology is essential to improving our lives, it cannot replace human values, labour, and empathy." Reflecting on current planning approaches, he noted the saturation of materialistic thinking in governance and stressed the need to shift focus toward the preservation of invaluable ecological and cultural assets - such as forests, wildlife, and rivers - whose destruction is a result of collective human neglect. He cited the *Narmada Parikrama* path as a living symbol of our traditional wisdom and river reverence. Highlighting how 92 river origins have been mapped in Madhya Pradesh, he observed that while tribal communities continue to protect and worship these sacred sources



Prahlad Singh Patel, Minister of Panchayat and Rural Development, at the launch of the Fifth Edition of the India Rural Colloquy.

during festivals like *Shivratri*, the educated class remains largely disconnected from this responsibility. "We consume, pollute, and forget where our rivers are born. This detachment must end," he urged. He further remarked, "We must accept past shortcomings and ask ourselves - do we include those learnings in future planning?" The Minister also launched the Gram Panchayat Helpdesk Initiative, inaugurated by Reshma Ninama from Alsiya, Petlawad block, a grassroots leader fostering change at the village level.

The MP Chapter of the Colloquy, hosted in collaboration with the Indian Institute of Forest Management (IIFM), Bhopal also saw the presence of other dignitaries.

In a panel discussion featuring Chote Singh (Director, Panchayati Raj), Dr P K Biswas, Dr Sharma, Prof Rajpal Gaur (WCD), and faculty from the School of Planning and Architecture. As per the statement, a key question emerged:

How do we design rural habitats that are not only safe and inclusive but also climate-resilient? Dr Biswas emphasised that agenda 2030 and the SDGs must begin from rural India, where sustainable development cannot be achieved without gender equity, local knowledge, and dismantling social barriers. He highlighted that women - the best natural resource managers - still lack rights over land, water, and forests, and that must change. The Fifth Edition of the India Rural Colloquy provided a powerful platform to reimagine rural development - not as a top-down infrastructure project but as a socio-cultural transformation, rooted in local realities and led by women and marginalised communities. The dialogue resulted in actionable recommendations for: Designing gender-inclusive, climate-resilient rural spaces; Promoting sustainable technologies and grassroots innovations; Strengthening local planning through GPDs, integrated with community inputs; Building enabling environments for pilots and scaled implementation in select districts. This convening reinforced that real change will come when rural voices lead, and when rural habitats are seen as living ecosystems - blending tradition with innovation, and dignity with design.

Notable attendees included Dr K Ravichandran (Director, IIFM), Dr P K Biswas (Former Vice Chancellor, Skyline University), Aliva Das (Associate Director, TRI), Rajesh Singh (TRI), Neha Gupta (Associate Director, TRI), Jitendra Pandit (Associate Director of Governance, TRI), and many other senior officials, community leaders, and changemakers from across the State.