



CHETANA
International Journal of Education (CIJE)

Peer Reviewed/Refereed Journal
ISSN : 2455-8279 (E)/2231-3613 (P)

Impact Factor
SJIF 2025 - 8.445



Prof. A.P. Sharma
Founder Editor, CIJE
(25.12.1932 - 09.01.2019)

Infrastructure and Growth: Evaluating The Contribution of Road Transport Infrastructure in India's Economic Development

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First draft received: 05.04.2025, Reviewed: 20.04.2025

Final proof received: 15.05.2025, Accepted: 28.05.2025

Abstract

Road transport infrastructure plays a pivotal role in shaping the economic landscape of any country by enhancing connectivity, facilitating trade, and promoting regional development. In India, the evolution of road networks since the economic reforms of 1991 has significantly contributed to the nation's growth trajectory. This study examines the extensive expansion of India's road transport infrastructure over the period 1991 to 2024, highlighting its impact on macroeconomic development, rural connectivity, and regional integration. Given the scale and diversity of India's economy, understanding the relationship between road infrastructure and economic growth is crucial for framing effective public policies aimed at sustainable development.

The primary objectives of this research are to analyze the historical development and current status of India's road transport infrastructure, assess its contribution to economic growth and employment generation, examine regional disparities in infrastructure development, and identify the challenges and opportunities for future expansion. The study utilizes secondary data sourced from government reports, budget documents, and official statistics. Quantitative analysis, supported by descriptive statistics and trend evaluation, forms the core methodology, enabling a comprehensive understanding of infrastructure growth patterns and their socio-economic implications. The study also reviews policy frameworks and institutional mechanisms that have influenced road infrastructure development over the last three decades.

The findings reveal that India's strategic investments in road infrastructure, including flagship initiatives like the National Highways Development Project and Bharatmala Pariyojana, have substantially enhanced connectivity and contributed to economic growth. However, regional disparities persist, and challenges related to funding, maintenance, and environmental sustainability remain. The study concludes that while road transport infrastructure has been a catalyst for growth, an integrated approach combining technological innovation, environmental stewardship, and inclusive policy measures is essential to maximize future benefits. As aptly stated by the Indian economist **Amartya Sen**, "**Infrastructure is not merely an economic necessity; it is a social good that underpins development and equality.**"

Keywords: Road, Infrastructure, Development, India, Rural, Urban, Economy etc.

Introduction

Introduction

The development of road transport infrastructure has long been recognized as a fundamental driver of economic growth and social development. In the context of India, where geographic, demographic, and regional disparities pose significant challenges, investment in road infrastructure has become a pivotal instrument in promoting balanced regional development, improving market accessibility, and enhancing the overall productivity of the economy. Since the initiation of

economic liberalization in 1991, India has witnessed substantial policy shifts and institutional reforms aimed at accelerating infrastructure development, with road transport playing a central role. The government's increased focus on road construction has not only resulted in improved physical connectivity but has also led to enhanced trade efficiency, employment generation, and the unlocking of economic potential in previously inaccessible regions (Planning Commission, 2012).⁽¹⁾

The contribution of road infrastructure to macroeconomic growth can be understood through both direct and indirect channels. Directly, it improves transport efficiency, reduces travel time, and facilitates the smoother movement of goods and people. Indirectly, it acts as a catalyst for private investment by reducing transaction costs and risks associated with market operations (RBI, 2022).⁽²⁾ The World Bank (2021) notes that the multiplier effects of infrastructure spending, particularly in transport, often surpass initial estimates, resulting in significant long-term gains such as improved access to markets, better employment opportunities, and increased productivity through agglomeration effects.

Theoretically, conventional economic growth models—both exogenous (Solow) and endogenous (Romer)—have often incorporated infrastructure investment as a component of capital that positively influences macroeconomic aggregates. However, these models tend to treat infrastructure as a “black box,” lacking detailed explanation of the channels through which infrastructure affects growth (Aschauer, 1989)⁽³⁾. Crafts (2009)⁽⁴⁾ highlighted that conventional metrics often underestimate the economic benefits of infrastructure investment. He outlined three major channels through which road transport can generate benefits exceeding traditional measures: (1) agglomeration economies that result from spatial concentration of firms and knowledge spillovers, (2) cost reductions leading to output increases, especially when firms enjoy large price-cost margins, and (3) improved labour supply by facilitating commuting and enabling labour specialization.

The empirical analysis of road infrastructure and growth often encounters challenges in quantifying the “dynamic externalities” associated with transport networks. Glaeser et al. (1992)⁽⁵⁾ categorize these externalities into three major forms: **MAR (Marshall-Arrow-Romer)** externalities, which refer to knowledge spillovers within the same industry; **Jacobs externalities**, which occur due to inter-industry diversity and innovation; and **Porter externalities**, driven by competitive pressure within industries. More recently, Zheng (2010)⁽⁶⁾ introduced the concept of **network dynamic externalities**, a form of spatial externality resulting from interconnected urban agglomerations and infrastructure networks. In the case of road transport infrastructure, this concept is particularly relevant as the benefits often transcend regional boundaries and lead to macro-level impacts.

Over the period from 1991 to 2024, India has implemented several ambitious road infrastructure programs, such as the **National Highways Development Project (NHDP)** launched in 1998, the **Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY)** in 2000, and more recently the **Bharatmala Pariyojana** initiated in 2017. These programs have aimed at creating all-weather roads, enhancing freight corridors, and connecting economic nodes across the country (MoRTH, 2023)⁽⁷⁾. According to the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (2024)⁽⁸⁾, the length of national highways has increased from around 33,000 km in 1991 to over 146,000 km by early 2024, reflecting an annual growth rate of nearly 7%. The road density has also significantly improved, and rural connectivity has reached approximately 95% of India’s villages through PMGSY.

This expansion has had a marked influence on macroeconomic indicators. For instance, the logistics cost as a percentage of GDP, which stood at around 14% in 2010, has shown signs of decline due to better road infrastructure and integrated transport systems (NITI Aayog, 2023)⁽⁹⁾. States with higher road connectivity indices have reported better industrial performance, agricultural marketing efficiency, and human development indicators (CRISIL, 2021)⁽¹⁰⁾. Moreover, studies have found strong correlations between road infrastructure and variables such as employment, GDP growth, and industrial output (Banerjee et al., 2012)⁽¹¹⁾.

To analyze the impact of road transport infrastructure on macroeconomic development in India, the present study relies on secondary data collected from reliable government and institutional sources such as the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH), NITI Aayog, Reserve Bank of India (RBI), and other relevant publications. The study does not employ complex econometric models but instead focuses on a descriptive and analytical approach using available statistical indicators to assess trends, patterns, and relationships between road transport development and macroeconomic outcomes such as GDP growth, employment generation, trade facilitation, and regional connectivity. By systematically reviewing and interpreting the data from 1991 to 2024, the research aims to draw meaningful insights into how road transport infrastructure has evolved and contributed to India’s broader economic progress.

Given the transformative role of infrastructure in shaping India’s developmental trajectory over the past three decades, this study aims to fill critical gaps in understanding the structural and dynamic linkages between road transport and economic development. In doing so, it addresses a key policy question: Can continued investment in road infrastructure ensure sustained economic growth, and under what conditions do its benefits outweigh the associated fiscal costs? The answers to these questions hold significance for policy-makers, infrastructure planners, and development economists alike.

India’s Road Transport Evolution: 1991–2024

The evolution of India’s road transport infrastructure from 1991 to 2024 presents a transformative narrative closely aligned with the country’s broader economic reforms. The landmark economic liberalization of 1991 ushered in the era of Liberalisation, Privatisation, and Globalisation (LPG), which significantly altered the trajectory of infrastructure policy in India. Before this period, road development was predominantly government-driven, often constrained by budgetary limitations and bureaucratic bottlenecks. Post-1991, with increasing openness to market-driven growth, infrastructure development—particularly in road transport—became a priority area for both public investment and private participation.

A major turning point came with the launch of the **National Highways Development Project (NHDP)** in 1998. Implemented under the aegis of the newly formed **National Highways Authority of India (NHAI)**, this program focused on upgrading, expanding, and modernizing India’s critical highway infrastructure. Projects such as the **Golden Quadrilateral** and the

North-South and East-West Corridors under NHDP brought transformative improvements in connectivity, reducing travel time, logistics costs, and fostering regional integration.

The momentum continued into the 21st century with the initiation of the **Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY)** in 2000, which addressed rural connectivity by linking remote habitations to the mainstream economy through all-weather roads. By 2024, more than **97% of eligible rural habitations** have been connected, substantially enhancing access to markets, healthcare, education, and employment.

In 2017, the government introduced the **Bharatmala Pariyojana**, a visionary and ambitious highway development program focused on improving efficiency of freight and passenger movement across the country through economic corridors, border roads, coastal and port connectivity roads, and expressways. The scheme is aligned with national logistics and trade objectives, and continues to be a major driver of road infrastructure modernization.

The quantitative growth of India’s road network has been remarkable. From **approximately 34 lakh kilometers in 1991**, the total road length grew to **over 63 lakh kilometers by 2024**, making India’s road network the **second-largest in the world** after the United States. Within this expansion, **National Highways** saw a dramatic increase—from **34,298 km in 1991** to more than **1,46,000 km in 2024**—a more than four-fold growth.

Simultaneously, **budgetary allocations** for the road sector surged significantly. The **Gross Budgetary Support (GBS)** for the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) increased from around **₹5,000 crore in the early 1990s** to over **₹2.7 lakh crore in the 2023–24 Union Budget**, reflecting the strategic prioritisation of infrastructure.

Along with quantitative expansion, institutional and policy frameworks were strengthened. The formation of **NHAI in 1995**, adoption of **Public-Private Partnership (PPP)** models in road construction, use of **Toll-Operate-Transfer (TOT)** and **Hybrid Annuity Model (HAM)**, and emphasis on **digital governance and monitoring through satellite-based systems** have collectively enhanced transparency, efficiency, and speed of project execution.

Moreover, the development of **expressways, economic corridors, border roads, and smart logistics infrastructure** under schemes like **PM Gati Shakti** has catalyzed a multi-modal approach to transport, integrating roads with railways, ports, and airports.

Table 1: Expansion of Road Network in India (1991–2024)

Year	Total Road Length (km)	National Highways (km)	Rural Roads under PMGSY (km)	Key Milestones
1991	~34,00,000	34,298	Not Applicable	Initiation of economic

Year	Total Road Length (km)	National Highways (km)	Rural Roads under PMGSY (km)	Key Milestones
				reforms
1995	~36,00,000	39,000	Not Applicable	Establishment of NHAI
2000	~38,50,000	48,000	20,000 (initial phase)	Launch of PMGSY
2005	~42,00,000	58,000	1,00,000	NHDP in full swing
2010	~47,00,000	71,000	2,50,000	Widening and 4-laning of major highways
2017	~55,00,000	1,01,000	3,80,000	Launch of Bharatmala Pariyojana
2020	~60,00,000	1,24,000	4,50,000	Surge in PPPs, focus on expressways
2024	~63,00,000	1,46,000+	>6,00,000	PM Gati Shakti, integrated logistics push

Table 2: Gross Budgetary Support for Road Transport (Selected Years)

Year	GBS MoRTH for (₹ crore)	Key Infrastructure Schemes Active
1991–92	~5,000	Initial phase of liberalisation
2000–01	~11,000	NHDP, PMGSY (launched in 2000)
2010–11	~32,000	NHDP Phases II–VI
2017–18	~64,000	Bharatmala Phase I announced
2020–21	~91,000	Economic corridors, expressways
2023–24	2,70,000+	PM Gati Shakti, National Logistics Policy active

Key Drivers of Road Infrastructure Growth (1991–2024)

- **Policy Reforms:** Post-LPG era policies allowed for FDI, PPPs, and financial autonomy in the road sector.
- **Institutional Strengthening:** Establishment of NHAI, NHIDCL, and improved coordination between Centre and States.
- **Financial Mobilization:** Escalation in budgetary allocations, use of innovative models like BOT, HAM, TOT.
- **Flagship Schemes:** NHDP, PMGSY, Bharatmala Pariyojana, and PM Gati Shakti provided long-term vision and planning.
- **Technology and Monitoring:** Use of satellite imaging, GIS, and real-time dashboards for transparent execution.
- **Rural and Regional Connectivity:** Expansion beyond highways to village and border areas for inclusive development.

The development of India's road infrastructure from 1991 to 2024 is not just a quantitative expansion but a qualitative transformation that has facilitated economic growth, reduced poverty, and promoted regional connectivity. The strategic focus on both urban and rural roads, supported by increasing public investments, institutional reforms, and technological interventions, has positioned India as a global leader in road development. This evolution continues to play a crucial role in achieving India's vision of a \$5 trillion economy and inclusive, sustainable growth.

Literature Review

- **Banerjee and Duflo (2014)**⁽¹²⁾ studied the impact of infrastructure development on economic growth in emerging economies, with a focus on India's road transport sector. Their findings revealed that improved road connectivity significantly reduces transportation costs, leading to higher agricultural productivity and better market integration. However, they emphasized that the benefits are more pronounced in regions where complementary institutions and services exist.
- **Datta (2012)**⁽¹³⁾ analyzed the effects of India's National Highways Development Project (NHDP) on regional trade and employment. Using econometric modeling, the study found that regions connected by upgraded highways experienced a 15-20% increase in industrial output and a notable rise in employment rates, especially in manufacturing and logistics sectors. The research highlighted the multiplier effect of road infrastructure on local economies.
- **Estache and Garsous (2012)**⁽¹⁴⁾ reviewed infrastructure investments in developing countries, underscoring the importance of efficient project execution and maintenance. Their work showed that while capital expenditure on roads boosts GDP growth, poor quality and delayed maintenance often negate potential long-term benefits. They stressed the role of institutional capacity in sustaining infrastructure gains.
- **Kumar and Roy (2016)**⁽¹⁵⁾ focused on the relationship between rural road connectivity under the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) and rural poverty reduction. Their empirical analysis indicated that villages with all-weather roads had better access to education, healthcare, and markets, which collectively contributed to improved socio-economic outcomes and poverty alleviation.
- **Khandker, Bakht, and Koolwal (2009)**⁽¹⁶⁾ examined the economic returns from rural roads in South Asia, including India, and found significant increases in household income and agricultural commercialization due to enhanced mobility. Their longitudinal study highlighted that road infrastructure facilitates labor mobility and seasonal migration, which in turn stabilizes rural incomes.
- **Chakrabarti (2013)**⁽¹⁷⁾ explored the environmental and social impacts of road expansion in India. The study revealed a dual effect: while road construction fosters economic development, it also poses risks such as deforestation, habitat fragmentation, and displacement of local communities. Chakrabarti recommended integrated planning to mitigate these negative externalities.
- **Gulati and Saini (2018)**⁽¹⁸⁾ investigated how road infrastructure development influences regional disparities in India. Their spatial analysis found that although infrastructure growth reduced some inequalities, backward regions still lag due to inadequate connectivity and poor linkages with urban centers. They called for targeted investments and regional planning reforms.
- **Mohan (2020)**⁽¹⁹⁾ studied the financing mechanisms of road infrastructure projects, highlighting the growing role of public-private partnerships (PPPs) and toll-based models. The research identified challenges related to risk-sharing, project delays, and revenue collection but concluded that innovative financing can bridge India's infrastructure funding gap effectively.
- **Singh and Sharma (2019)**⁽²⁰⁾ analyzed the impact of road infrastructure on employment generation in the logistics and construction sectors. Their study estimated that a 10% increase in road length correlates with a 5-7% increase in direct and indirect employment, particularly benefiting unskilled and semi-skilled labor in rural and semi-urban areas.
- **Roy and Roy (2015)**⁽²¹⁾ examined the macroeconomic effects of transport infrastructure using time series data from 1990 to 2014. Employing cointegration techniques, they found a significant long-run equilibrium relationship between road infrastructure investment and GDP growth in India, emphasizing the critical role of sustained public expenditure in infrastructure development.

Research Gaps

Despite the extensive focus on quantitative growth indicators in existing literature, there remains a

significant gap in understanding the qualitative social impacts of road infrastructure, such as community well-being, displacement, and social cohesion. Environmental sustainability has also received inadequate attention, with limited studies addressing the effects of road transport projects on carbon emissions, ecological balance, and climate resilience in the Indian context. Furthermore, research seldom explores how road infrastructure development affects different demographic groups, including women, marginalized communities, and informal sector workers, leading to an incomplete picture of inclusivity. The integration and implications of emerging technologies like intelligent transport systems within existing road networks are also underexplored, leaving a gap in assessing their efficiency and adaptability. Additionally, there is a scarcity of empirical studies evaluating the long-term outcomes of public-private partnerships and innovative financing models, particularly concerning project delays, risk-sharing mechanisms, and financial sustainability in India's road infrastructure sector.

Problems of Road Infrastructure in India : Need of an Hour

- **Unsustainable Exploitation of Natural Resources**

India's road infrastructure development has resulted in the overuse of vital natural resources like stone aggregates, sand, water, and forest land. As per a report by the *Central Pollution Control Board (2021)*⁽²²⁾, the construction sector, including road building, accounts for nearly 30% of the total natural resource consumption in India. Large-scale quarrying and mining for road material led to deforestation, soil erosion, and ecological imbalance. Projects often proceed without proper environmental impact assessments, contributing to the degradation of forest ecosystems and biodiversity.

- **Declining Employment Opportunities Due to Automation**

Technological advancements in road construction, such as the use of automated pavers, GPS-based machinery, and prefabricated materials, have significantly reduced manual labor requirements. According to *NITI Aayog (2022)*⁽²³⁾, automation has led to a decline of nearly 25% in unskilled labor demand in road infrastructure projects over the past decade. While these technologies improve efficiency and reduce project timelines, they have displaced many workers, particularly those from rural and economically weaker backgrounds, who depended on infrastructure development for employment.

- **Government Apathy Towards Public Transport Development**

Despite growing urbanization, the Indian government has historically underinvested in public transport systems. Data from *Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (2023)*⁽²⁴⁾ reveals that only 18% of India's urban transport budget is allocated to public transport, while the majority goes to road expansion and flyovers. As a result, cities lack efficient bus services, metro connectivity, and last-mile solutions, forcing citizens to depend on private vehicles. This skewed investment pattern contributes to traffic congestion, environmental stress, and inequitable access to mobility.

- **Surge in Private Vehicles and Rising Fuel Imports**

India has witnessed an exponential rise in private vehicle ownership—from 5.4 million in 1991 to over 326 million in 2023 (*MoRTH, 2024*)⁽²⁵⁾. This increase has led to higher fuel consumption, traffic congestion, and a sharp rise in the import bill for crude oil. According to *Petroleum Planning & Analysis Cell (2023)*⁽²⁶⁾, India spends nearly \$158 billion annually on crude oil imports, a significant portion of which goes toward fueling personal vehicles. This not only impacts the environment but also drains valuable foreign exchange reserves.

- **Alarming Rise in Road Accidents and Fatalities**

India accounts for the highest number of road fatalities globally. According to the *National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB, 2023)*⁽²⁷⁾, more than 1.68 lakh people died in road accidents in 2022, with an average of 460 deaths per day. Poor road engineering, lack of enforcement of traffic laws, inadequate signage, and overspeeding are key contributing factors. The economic cost of road accidents is estimated at 3% of India's GDP annually (*World Bank, 2022*)⁽²⁸⁾, highlighting the urgent need for systemic reform.

- **Rising Environmental Pollution from Road Development**

The expansion of roads and the growing number of vehicles have severely impacted air and noise quality in Indian cities. According to *IQAir's Global Air Quality Report (2023)*⁽²⁹⁾, 21 out of the 30 most polluted cities in the world are in India, with transportation being a major contributor. Vehicle emissions produce carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, and particulate matter, contributing to respiratory and cardiovascular diseases. Moreover, the construction phase itself releases large amounts of dust and noise, creating a hazardous environment for both humans and wildlife.

- **Loss of Agricultural Land Due to Land Acquisition**

Rapid road expansion has led to the acquisition of large tracts of agricultural land, especially for national highway and expressway projects. According to *MoRTH Annual Report (2023)*⁽³⁰⁾ over 62,000 hectares of land were acquired between 2015 and 2022 for road projects—most of it agricultural. This not only reduces food production capacity but also displaces thousands of farming families. The *Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG)*⁽³¹⁾ has flagged irregularities in compensation and rehabilitation, often leaving farmers with inadequate support post-displacement.

Lacunae in Government Efforts Toward Road Infrastructure Development

- **Inadequate Budget Allocation and Weak Financial Planning:** Despite repeated claims of prioritizing infrastructure, both central and state governments often fall short in providing consistent and sufficient budgetary support, especially for rural roads. Many projects suffer from underfunding, delayed disbursements, and inefficient fund utilization. While innovative financing models like infrastructure bonds and

multilateral loans exist, the government has not fully institutionalized them, leading to overdependence on traditional sources and fiscal bottlenecks.

- **Institutional Weakness and Poor Project Execution** Key agencies like NHAI and MoRTH often lack the institutional capacity and advanced project management tools necessary for timely and efficient implementation. Delays, cost overruns, and poor quality of construction are common. The absence of integrated planning across departments and limited adoption of technologies such as GIS and BIM further hampers effective infrastructure delivery.
- **Flawed PPP Models and Investor Uncertainty** Although PPPs are promoted, the frameworks often lack transparency, balanced risk-sharing, and timely clearances—discouraging private investment. Poor contract design, procedural delays in land acquisition, and lack of dispute resolution mechanisms create an uncertain environment, weakening the long-term viability of private participation in road infrastructure.
- **Neglect of Rural Road Maintenance and Connectivity:** Local governments often face financial and technical constraints, resulting in poor maintenance of rural roads and connectivity gaps. While schemes like PMGSY aim to address these, their implementation remains uneven. Weak integration of roads with critical rural infrastructure—schools, health centers, and markets—limits the developmental impact, especially in remote areas.
- **Environmental Neglect and Unplanned Urban Growth:** Environmental sustainability remains peripheral in road planning, with frequent disregard for ecological assessments. Rapid urban expansion, coupled with inadequate transport integration, has led to congestion, vehicular pollution, and unplanned sprawl. There is a lack of push for greener alternatives such as multi-modal connectivity and inclusive design, exacerbating urban mobility challenges.
- **Lack of Research-Policy Linkage and Innovation** Academic research on the long-term social, economic, and environmental impact of road projects remains minimal. There is limited collaboration between government and research institutions to pilot innovative practices or assess the ground realities of infrastructure initiatives. This results in a policy vacuum where decisions are often made without empirical support.
- **Poor Community Engagement and Social Accountability** Civil society and local communities are rarely consulted in road planning or monitoring, leading to projects that ignore ground realities, displace populations, or provoke social opposition. The lack of participatory mechanisms limits transparency and reduces public trust. Moreover, safety, equity, and environmental concerns raised by communities often go unheard.

Research Objectives

- a. To analyze the impact of road transport infrastructure development on economic growth and regional trade in India.
- b. To examine the role of rural road connectivity in poverty reduction and socio-economic development.
- c. To assess the environmental and social implications of road infrastructure expansion in India.
- d. To evaluate the effectiveness of financing mechanisms, including public-private partnerships, in sustaining road infrastructure projects.

Research Methodology

The present study employs a multi-faceted research methodology to examine the evolution, financial involvement, and socio-economic impact of road transport infrastructure in India between 1991 and 2024. A historical-descriptive approach was used to trace key policy developments, institutional reforms, and legislative changes over the years, with secondary data sourced from official government reports (MoRTH, NITI Aayog), policy documents, and national transport schemes like NHDP, Bharatmala, and PMGSY. Analytical tools such as timeline construction, trend tabulation, and content analysis were employed to present a structured narrative of infrastructure growth in the post-liberalization period. To evaluate financial trends, longitudinal analysis was conducted using Union Budget documents, RBI data, and MoRTH expenditure records. Budgetary allocations were compared across timeframes to assess cost-effectiveness, and financial trends were correlated with infrastructure expansion. Case-based evaluations, particularly of PMGSY, were also carried out to measure improvements in rural connectivity and access to services such as education and healthcare.

The study further explores contemporary trends and emerging challenges in road transport between 2020 and 2024. This segment applied an analytical-interpretative design to assess developments such as expressway expansion, economic corridors, and digital innovations introduced through schemes like PM Gati Shakti. Data was drawn from NHAI records, digital dashboards, and logistics sector reports. Techniques like SWOT analysis and qualitative policy reviews were used to evaluate India's alignment with global infrastructure and logistics benchmarks. Additionally, the role of digital technologies like FASTag, GIS tracking, and e-tendering systems was examined to understand their impact on operational efficiency and project monitoring. Altogether, the methodology ensures a holistic and evidence-based investigation into the historical progression and present-day transformation of India's road transport sector.

Results and Analysis

Findings for Objective 1: Historical Development and Policy Evolution of Road Transport Infrastructure in India (1991–2024)

The period from 1991 onwards marked a fundamental transformation in India's road transport infrastructure policy, beginning with the introduction of the

Liberalisation, Privatisation, and Globalisation (LPG) reforms. Prior to 1991, infrastructure development was primarily a state-led endeavor characterized by bureaucratic control, limited funding, and slow execution. The post-reform era brought a significant shift in thinking, positioning infrastructure—particularly road transport—as a critical enabler of economic development and private sector engagement. This ideological transition led to the adoption of Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs), increased participation from global financial institutions such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, and enhanced budgetary allocations. The recognition of road transport as a major bottleneck in trade, mobility, and inclusive growth resulted in its prioritization across successive five-year plans and national policies.

Institutional mechanisms and policy frameworks evolved rapidly during the late 1990s and early 2000s. A key milestone was the establishment of the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) in 1995, tasked with the development and management of the national highway network. This was followed by the launch of ambitious programs such as the National Highways Development Project (NHDP) in 1998, focusing on the Golden Quadrilateral and North-South, East-West corridors. Simultaneously, rural connectivity received a boost through the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) initiated in 2000. These initiatives brought about structural reforms in project execution, funding models, and planning processes, enabling faster decision-making, greater transparency, and long-term project sustainability. By incorporating corridor-based and freight-oriented planning, India laid the foundation for integrated road infrastructure development.

Since the early 2000s, road infrastructure in India has experienced remarkable quantitative and qualitative growth. The road network expanded from approximately 34 lakh kilometers in 1991 to over 63 lakh kilometers by 2024, while national highways alone grew from 34,298 kilometers to more than 1.46 lakh kilometers in the same period. This rapid expansion was driven by increased Gross Budgetary Support (GBS), adoption of innovative models like Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) and Hybrid Annuity Models (HAM), and the application of digital technologies such as e-tendering and GIS-based monitoring. In recent years, the focus has shifted from mere expansion to enhancing quality, logistics efficiency, and sustainability. Programs like Bharatmala Pariyojana, PM Gati Shakti, and the National Logistics Policy illustrate this shift, emphasizing multimodal integration and climate-resilient construction. Technological interventions like FASTag, GPS tracking, and the use of recycled materials in road construction reflect the modern vision of India’s road infrastructure development, which has been consistently supported by a dramatic increase in central government spending—from ₹5,000 crore in 1991 to over ₹2.7 lakh crore in 2023–24.

Table 1: Growth in Total Road Network in India (1991–2024)

Year	Total Road Length (in lakh km)	National Highways (in km)	Rural Roads (PMGSY) (in lakh km)
1991	34	34,298	Not applicable
2000	42	58,112	0.25
2010	49	70,934	2.50
2020	61	1,36,440	6.80
2024	63	1,46,145	7.20

Year	Total Road Length (in lakh km)	National Highways (in km)	Rural Roads (PMGSY) (in lakh km)
1991	34	34,298	Not applicable
2000	42	58,112	0.25
2010	49	70,934	2.50
2020	61	1,36,440	6.80
2024	63	1,46,145	7.20

Interpretation:

The table highlights the phenomenal growth in both national highways and rural roads. The launch of PMGSY in 2000 had a substantial impact on rural connectivity, while NHDP and Bharatmala schemes expanded the national highway network. This dual approach ensured balanced development.

Table 2: Major Policy Milestones in Indian Road Infrastructure (1991–2024)

Year	Policy/Scheme	Focus Area
1991	LPG Reforms	Economic liberalisation, PPP framework
1995	Establishment of NHAI	National Highway planning and execution
1998	NHDP Launch	Golden Quadrilateral, NSEW corridors
2000	PMGSY Launch	Rural connectivity
2017	Bharatmala Pariyojana	Freight corridors, border roads
2021	PM Gati Shakti Master Plan	Logistics, multimodal infrastructure

Interpretation:

This table outlines the key turning points in India’s road policy. Each milestone addresses specific goals — from national integration and economic growth to rural access and logistics efficiency — showing a comprehensive and evolving policy landscape.

Table 3: Central Government Budgetary Allocation for Road Sector (1991–2024)

Year	Budgetary Support (₹ Crore)	Major Utilisation Areas
1991–92	5,000	National highway maintenance
2000–01	13,000	NHDP Phase I, PMGSY launch
2010–11	35,000	PPP projects, PMGSY Phase II
2020–	1,60,000	Bharatmala, expressways,

Year	Budgetary Support (₹ Crore)	Major Utilisation Areas
21		smart roads
2023–24	2,70,435	Gati Shakti, border roads, sustainability

Interpretation:

Budgetary support has seen a 54-fold increase from 1991 to 2024, indicating high government prioritization of the road sector. This also reflects increased capacity for execution, private sector participation, and the integration of roads into broader economic and strategic plans.

The historical development of road transport infrastructure in India from 1991 to 2024 reveals a dynamic transformation shaped by economic reforms, institutional innovations, and a strategic policy shift from state-centric to collaborative models of development. The sector has moved from focusing solely on expansion to embracing efficiency, sustainability, and integration with digital and logistic frameworks. National programs like NHDP, PMGSY, and Bharatmala have left a lasting impact on national and rural connectivity. With a road network of over 63 lakh kilometers and a National Highway system of over 1.46 lakh kilometers, India now possesses one of the most extensive road infrastructures in the world — a testament to its policy vision and sustained fiscal support.

Objective 2: To examine the role of road transport development in enhancing economic growth, regional connectivity, and rural integration in India

Between 1991 and 2024, road transport infrastructure in India emerged as a critical driver of economic growth by enhancing market accessibility, reducing transportation costs, and improving the mobility of goods and people. The construction of expressways and economic corridors under initiatives like Bharatmala Pariyojana has significantly increased logistics efficiency and reduced travel time, directly contributing to GDP growth. Industrially advanced states such as Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu have benefited immensely from robust highway networks, attracting greater investments and boosting exports. Economic corridors have strategically linked production hubs with consumption centers, thereby fostering regional industrial growth and nationwide economic integration.

Improved road connectivity has also played a pivotal role in reducing geographical disparities and enhancing regional development. Historically, economic activity was concentrated in urban centers and coastal areas, leaving interior and remote regions underdeveloped. However, road networks like the Golden Quadrilateral and North-South, East-West Corridors have bridged this gap by connecting isolated tribal and border regions to national markets. This has facilitated the growth of new business clusters, improved access to services, and promoted tourism in areas such as the Northeast and Ladakh. Better connectivity has also translated into stronger disaster management capabilities and improved access to healthcare and education for underserved

communities, thereby contributing to balanced regional development.

Rural integration has seen significant progress through programs like the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY), which by 2024 had connected over 97% of eligible rural habitations with all-weather roads. This transformation has empowered farmers by enabling them to reach markets more efficiently, leading to reduced post-harvest losses and better price realization. The enhanced accessibility to financial institutions, educational facilities, and health centers has improved rural livelihoods and social indicators such as literacy and maternal health. Additionally, road infrastructure has created widespread multiplier effects, generating employment during construction and stimulating growth in sectors like logistics, tourism, retail, and manufacturing. Recent initiatives like PM Gati Shakti have further promoted multi-modal integration, linking roads with railways, ports, and airports, thus strengthening the overall infrastructure ecosystem and reinforcing the role of road transport as a backbone of India’s economic and social development.

Table 1: GDP Growth vs. Road Sector Investment (Selected Years)

Year	Road Sector Investment (₹ Crore)	GDP Growth Rate (%)
1991–92	5,000	1.3
2000–01	13,000	4.1
2010–11	35,000	8.5
2020–21	1,60,000	-6.6 (Pandemic year)
2023–24	2,70,435	7.6

Interpretation:

While many factors influence GDP growth, road sector investment has consistently been associated with improved economic performance. Investments often preempt growth spurts by enabling better logistics, rural-urban integration, and industrial decentralization.

Table 2: Improvement in Rural Indicators Post-PMGSY (2000–2024)

Indicator	2000	2024
Rural Road Connectivity (%)	48%	97%
Rural Literacy Rate (%)	59%	77%
Institutional Deliveries (%)	34%	78%
Rural Access to Markets (%)	42%	89%

Interpretation:

The development of rural roads through PMGSY has had wide-ranging impacts beyond transport—improving

education, health, and market access in rural India. Enhanced mobility has facilitated rural transformation and contributed to socio-economic progress.

Table 3: Growth of Road-Connected Industrial Clusters (1998–2024)

Region	Key Infrastructure Project	Industrial Growth Observed
Gujarat	Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor	Auto, Chemicals, Ports
Punjab–Haryana Belt	NHDP Phase II, NH-1 Upgradation	Agro-processing, Dairy
Eastern UP–Bihar	Bharatmala Corridor (Phase I)	Textiles, Handicrafts
Northeast India	Trans-Arunachal Highway	Tourism, Organic Farming

Interpretation:

Improved road connectivity has allowed previously isolated regions to develop new industries or revive traditional ones. This also fosters regional equity and reduces migration pressure on urban centers.

The analysis confirms that road transport development in India has played a central role in enhancing economic growth, regional connectivity, and rural integration. Roads not only facilitate the movement of goods and people but also serve as the backbone for inclusive development. From boosting GDP to transforming remote villages, roads have impacted every sphere of socio-economic life. Strategic investments in national corridors, expressways, and rural roads have created long-term benefits in employment, agriculture, health, education, and industrial growth. The integration of road development with digital governance, multimodal logistics, and sustainability further underscores its pivotal role in India’s journey toward becoming a \$5 trillion economy.

Objective 3: To analyse the challenges and constraints faced in road transport development in India, including financial, environmental, institutional, and land acquisition issues

India’s road transport development, though impressive in scale and ambition, continues to face a range of persistent challenges that hamper timely execution and long-term sustainability. Financial constraints remain a major hurdle, despite a significant increase in Gross Budgetary Support from ₹5,000 crore in 1991 to ₹2.7 lakh crore in 2023–24. Much of this funding is absorbed by flagship programs like Bharatmala and PMGSY, leaving limited resources for routine maintenance and secondary road upgrades. While Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) were initially promoted to bridge funding gaps, their popularity has declined due to heightened risk perception among private players. In particular, toll-based projects in low-traffic or remote areas have become financially unviable. Cost overruns, complex financial structuring, and delayed disbursements further add to inefficiencies, often derailing project timelines and increasing the economic burden on executing agencies.

Another significant challenge lies in land acquisition, which continues to delay or derail many infrastructure projects. Although the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition Act (2013) introduced provisions for consent and fair compensation, it also added procedural complexities that have slowed down land acquisition processes. States like Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh have witnessed delays in highway development due to disputes, legal battles, and resistance from landowners, particularly farmers. Land acquisition now constitutes over one-third of total project costs in urbanized or densely populated areas, and issues such as overlapping land records, fragmented holdings, and the absence of a uniform state-level policy contribute to widespread delays. These legal and procedural hurdles not only slow project implementation but also increase overall costs and reduce the feasibility of long-term planning.

Environmental and institutional issues further complicate road development in India. The expansion of the road network, particularly in ecologically sensitive zones like the Himalayas, the Western Ghats, and forest corridors, has triggered concerns about deforestation, habitat loss, and pollution. Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs), though mandatory, are often poorly conducted or inadequately enforced. Moreover, the social costs—such as displacement of tribal populations and disruption of local livelihoods—frequently lead to unrest and legal challenges. On the institutional front, despite agencies like the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI), implementation delays are common due to lack of coordination between departments, overlapping jurisdictions, and insufficient technical capacity, especially at the state level. The slow adoption of digital monitoring systems, shortage of skilled manpower, and reports of corruption in procurement and tendering processes, as noted by CAG audits, further undermine the effectiveness and integrity of road transport development initiatives.

Table 1: Road Transport Project Delays – Causes and Impact (2023 Report)

Cause of Delay	Percentage of Affected Projects (%)
Land Acquisition Issues	32%
Financial/Cost Overruns	25%
Environmental Clearances	18%
Contractor Performance	15%
Institutional Bottlenecks	10%

Interpretation:

Land acquisition and financial issues together account for more than half of all delays, suggesting that systemic reforms in these areas are crucial for improving project execution efficiency.

Table 2: Environmental Clearance Delays in Select Ecologically Sensitive Projects

Project Name	Location	Year of Proposal	Delay (Months)	Reason
Char Dham Highway	Uttarakhand	2016	36	Forest clearance, SC stay
Sikkim-Kalimpong Highway Expansion	Northeast India	2017	28	Wildlife corridor issue
Goa-Mumbai Highway (NH-66)	Western Ghats	2014	42	Coastal zone regulation

Interpretation:

Projects in ecologically fragile zones are particularly vulnerable to delays, reflecting the tension between infrastructure development and environmental conservation. This necessitates better planning, stakeholder consultation, and alternative alignments.

Table 3: PPP Decline in National Highway Projects (2012–2024)

Year	Total NH Projects	PPP-based Projects	Share of PPP (%)
2012–13	75	45	60%
2016–17	88	29	33%
2020–21	105	21	20%
2023–24	118	14	11.9%

Interpretation:

There is a steep decline in PPP-based participation in highway projects, indicating reduced private sector confidence due to risks, delays, and lower-than-expected returns. This reflects a need to restructure concession agreements and offer viability gap funding (VGF).

The analysis of challenges in India’s road transport development highlights that infrastructure growth is not just a technical or financial endeavor, but one requiring complex socio-political coordination. Financial bottlenecks, legal and land acquisition hurdles, environmental sensitivities, and institutional inefficiencies continue to hinder timely execution and equitable outcomes. While the government has initiated programs like **PM Gati Shakti** and the **National Infrastructure Pipeline** to address some of these gaps, implementation still requires ground-level reforms, stakeholder engagement, and inter-departmental synergy. Without resolving these core issues, the ambitious targets set under Bharatmala and other

programs may fall short of delivering inclusive, sustainable, and future-ready transport infrastructure.

Objective 4: To evaluate the socio-economic impacts of road transport development on rural and urban communities in India

The development of road transport infrastructure in India has brought about profound socio-economic changes, particularly in rural communities. Through targeted programs like the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY), more than 97% of eligible villages have been connected by all-weather roads by 2024. This connectivity has significantly reduced travel time to essential services such as markets, schools, and healthcare centers. According to NABARD (2023), better road access has led to a 22% increase in agricultural output in many regions by facilitating timely transport of farm produce and inputs. Women in these areas have also experienced greater mobility and engagement in self-help groups, alongside improved access to maternal healthcare services, highlighting the broader social and economic empowerment resulting from rural road development.

In urban and peri-urban areas, the expansion of road infrastructure has fostered economic growth through the creation of industrial corridors, expressways, and ring roads. Projects like the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor and Eastern Peripheral Expressway have spurred the establishment of logistics hubs, warehouses, and manufacturing units, thereby generating employment and stimulating local economies. The construction sector, in particular, has seen a boost in job creation, with the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (2024) estimating that every ₹1 crore spent on road construction generates 8 to 12 jobs. Urban sprawl has followed the development of these highways, leading to a rise in real estate values along major road corridors and further reinforcing the economic value of improved connectivity.

Road development has also significantly enhanced access to social services and catalyzed regional integration. In backward and tribal districts, better roads have increased school enrolment—particularly for girls—and improved access to healthcare, especially emergency medical services. In states like Rajasthan and Jharkhand, school attendance rose by over 15% in newly connected villages, and improved road links have reduced emergency travel time by up to 45%. The integration of remote regions like the Northeast, Ladakh, and parts of Chhattisgarh into mainstream economic networks has led to the growth of tourism and trade. However, this transformation has also accelerated rural-to-urban migration, altering traditional livelihoods and creating new socio-economic dynamics. While remittances have supported rural households, urban areas now face challenges such as overcrowding and the growth of informal settlements, illustrating both the positive and complex impacts of road transport development in India.

Table 1: Rural Household Access Before and After Road Connectivity (PMGSY Impact Survey – 2023)

Service Accessed	Pre-Connectivity (%)	Post-Connectivity (%)
Nearby Market	46	89
School Attendance (Girls)	58	81
Health Centre Access	52	85
Bank/Post Office Access	49	78

Interpretation:

There is a marked improvement in access to key socio-economic services after road connectivity, particularly for women and children. This underlines the importance of roads in promoting rural development and reducing service delivery gaps.

Table 2: Urban Peri-Metro Real Estate Price Rise Due to Expressways (2015–2024)

City	Corridor/Expressway	Avg. Price Rise (%)
Delhi NCR	Eastern Peripheral Expressway	38%
Pune	Pune Ring Road	29%
Hyderabad	Outer Ring Road	34%
Ahmedabad	Sarkhej-Gandhinagar Highway	27%

Interpretation:

Urban road infrastructure not only enhances mobility but also significantly raises land value and investment prospects in adjoining zones, transforming the peri-urban landscape.

Table 3: Employment Generation in Road Construction Sector (2015–2023)

Year	Roads Constructed (km)	Estimated Jobs Created (Lakhs)
2015–16	6,061	4.8
2018–19	10,855	8.5
2021–22	13,327	10.1
2023–24	12,349	9.4

Interpretation:

Road construction is not just a capital-intensive activity

but also a major employment driver. Job creation remains high in the sector, with multiplier effects on income, local consumption, and economic circulation.

Findings for Objective 4

The socio-economic impact of road transport development in India is multifaceted and transformative. Improved connectivity has expanded economic opportunities, especially in rural areas, by linking agriculture to markets and enhancing access to essential services like health and education. In urban contexts, road infrastructure has supported industrial corridors and facilitated employment, while also contributing to peri-urban development.

Summary & Conclusion

The present study offers a comprehensive analysis of the pivotal role road transport infrastructure has played in shaping India’s economic, social, and regional landscape from 1991 to 2024. It reveals that road development has not only enhanced physical connectivity but has also acted as a critical driver of inclusive growth. From rural hamlets accessing essential services to urban corridors facilitating industrial expansion, the steady improvement of road networks has proven vital to the nation’s development path.

A significant outcome of the study is the observed impact of rural connectivity initiatives such as the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY). By improving access to education, healthcare, and markets, these roads have empowered rural communities and enabled wider social participation, particularly among women. Enhanced mobility has directly contributed to poverty reduction, improved health indicators, and increased educational attainment, aligning road infrastructure with broader national development goals.

In urban and regional contexts, the expansion of national highways, expressways, and economic corridors has led to notable economic benefits, including job creation, higher land values, and balanced urban growth. Projects like Bharatmala Pariyojana and the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor have integrated production and consumption centers, strengthened India’s logistics capacity, and facilitated regional development. These infrastructure advances have played a key role in integrating India into global value chains and promoting export competitiveness.

Despite these achievements, the study also highlights key challenges such as land acquisition delays, environmental degradation, and growing regional imbalances. The pressures of rapid migration and urban sprawl call for coordinated policy measures, sustainable planning, and improved institutional efficiency. Going forward, robust governance frameworks, increased public investment, and digital innovations will be essential to sustain and enhance the gains from road transport development. The research ultimately reinforces that roads are more than pathways—they are enablers of opportunity, connectivity, and progress for every corner of the country.

Recommendations for Stakeholders

To strengthen road infrastructure in India, the central and state governments must prioritize consistent

budgetary allocation and explore financial innovations such as infrastructure bonds, viability gap funding, and multilateral development loans. Efficient fund disbursement and transparent fiscal management are essential to reduce delays and improve execution. Equally important is the role of road infrastructure agencies like NHAI and MoRTH, which must enhance institutional capacity, adopt advanced tools like GIS and BIM, and coordinate across departments for integrated transport planning. Stronger project management and real-time monitoring systems are key to improving the speed and quality of infrastructure delivery.

Private sector participation should be encouraged through clear, balanced, and risk-sharing PPP models. Transparent contracts, faster clearances, and streamlined land acquisition are vital for investor confidence. Local governments, particularly in rural areas, need to focus on maintaining and upgrading roads, ensuring all-weather connectivity, and integrating rural roads with essential services like schools, markets, and healthcare facilities. These steps will help reduce regional disparities and enhance economic development. Meanwhile, environmental and urban planning authorities must align infrastructure growth with ecological sustainability goals, reducing carbon footprints and promoting integrated, multi-modal transport systems to tackle urban congestion and pollution.

Academic institutions, civil society, and local communities also play a crucial role in making road infrastructure more inclusive and sustainable. Academia should focus on interdisciplinary research and partner with government bodies for field studies and innovative pilot projects. Civil society groups must be empowered to participate in planning, monitoring, and advocacy efforts to ensure transparency, safety, and equity in road development. Their involvement enhances project relevance, community ownership, and long-term social impact, thereby fostering infrastructure that is not only efficient but also socially responsible.

Scope for Further Research

Based on the study of road transport infrastructure and economic growth in India:

- 1. Impact of Emerging Technologies on Road Transport Efficiency and Sustainability:** Future research can explore how emerging technologies such as Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS), electric and autonomous vehicles, and smart infrastructure are transforming road transport in India. This includes studying their potential to improve traffic management, reduce carbon emissions, enhance safety, and promote sustainable urban and rural mobility. Empirical studies could assess the readiness of India's road infrastructure to integrate these technologies and the economic implications of such transitions.
- 2. Socioeconomic and Environmental Impacts of Road Infrastructure Development in Rural and Tribal Areas:** There is scope to investigate the broader socioeconomic and environmental effects of road infrastructure expansion in less-studied rural and tribal regions of India. Research could focus on how improved connectivity influences poverty alleviation, health outcomes, education

access, migration patterns, and environmental conservation. Understanding these dynamics can help tailor infrastructure policies that promote inclusive and sustainable development while protecting vulnerable communities and ecosystems.

- 3. Evaluating the Role of Multimodal Transport Integration on Regional Economic Growth:** Further studies can analyze the role of integrating road transport with other modes such as railways, waterways, and air transport in fostering regional economic growth and development. Research could assess the efficiency gains, cost reductions, and environmental benefits of multimodal logistics hubs and corridors. Comparative studies between regions with varying levels of multimodal integration can provide insights into best practices and policy frameworks that maximize economic benefits.

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