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Higher Education in Rural India: A SWOT Analysis through Selected Case Studies

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ABSTRACT

Rural India is the backbone of our economy and plays a very important role in building human capital, promoting social inclusion, and empowering women. However, a specific sector, i.e., higher education in rural India, still faces challenges related to infrastructure, digital access, quality, and global exposure. This study evaluates the status of higher education in rural India through two selected case studies and a SWOT analysis. The paper follows a descriptive and qualitative research design, while secondary data sources have been used to investigate two models, which are i) the Gandhigram Rural Institute (formal, skill-based, community-oriented) and ii) Barefoot College (non-formal, vocational, grassroots empowerment) for analysis purposes. The results show that, apart from aligning with national initiatives such as NEP 2020, rural higher education offers significant strengths, like community engagement and vocational pathways. While weaknesses such as financial constraints, social inequality, and digital exclusion still exist. Blended learning, women's digital empowerment, and institutional partnerships are opportunities. On the other hand, societal hurdles, migration, and the rural-urban gap are significant threats to higher education in rural India. The study highlights that both formal and informal models help in minimizing educational gaps by complementing each other. It also emphasises the importance of the NEP 2020 policy framework, suggesting that an inclusive, holistic, and skill-oriented

approach is needed to strengthen rural higher education and achieve the objective of Viksit Bharat 2047.

1. Introduction

1.1 Higher Education: An overview

The roots of education in India have emerged from the ancient philosophical tradition, "vidya," which refers to holistic self-empowerment and freeing from ignorance rather than just the accumulation of knowledge. The ethics and morals shaped significant centers of learning, such as Takshashila and Nalanda, which fostered a multidisciplinary approach and critical thinking, attracting students from across the world. These centres declined due to historical disruptions. Indigenous educational systems declined with British colonial rule in the 18th century, prompting the introduction of a utilitarian, English-based model aimed at producing an administrative workforce. Elphinstone's Minutes (1823) and Macaulay's Minutes (1835) were two such policies that helped establish universities in Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay in 1857, based on the University of London model. Education as a tool for national regeneration, character formation, and holistic development was redefined by leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, and Sri Aurobindo during the late 19th century. According to the leaders, true education goes beyond literacy. It nurtures intellectual growth, moral strength, and fosters harmony among individuals and societies. A system rooted in Indian civilizational and cultural values, and which aligns well with the goals of nation-building and independence. India established institutions like the IITs, IIMs, and Central Universities to promote scientific, industrial, and managerial advancement as a result of its post-independence emphasis on higher education as a cornerstone of nation-building. State Public Universities, which enroll the majority of students and guarantee access, affordability, and inclusivity across regions, have evolved as the backbone of the higher education system alongside these centres of excellence. Together, these organizations have been essential in developing talent, fostering regional growth, and accelerating India's socioeconomic transition.

1.2 Higher education and its potential

India is in a position to take a big leap and become a developed nation in the next 25 years, and to promote this development strategy, higher education in India should be prioritized. With such a humongous population, the majority being young individuals, India should not be depending on imported knowledge and human resources to foster its growth; rather, the focus should be on promoting a prosperous entrepreneurial system for its domestic human talent to solve the national and international

challenges. The potential of the Indian education system and youth is evident from Silicon Valley's tech giants, which have 33% of the workforce from Indian origin. 25% of the stat-ups are also led by them, playing key roles in banking, finance, and healthcare across West Asia, Europe, and North America. Alumni of Indian higher education institutions have secured significant positions in leading global institutions and proved their meritorious performances. The significance and potential of the Indian higher education system shine through the global business icons leading in giant MNCs and other institutions, who are alumni of the Indian higher education system. India must focus on an innovation-led and research-driven higher education system to build a Viksit Bharat, where every child gets an opportunity to be an efficient asset in their profession. NEP 2020 recognizes this need and promotes multi-disciplinary research, international collaborations, internships while studying, and multiple entry-exit options, which cultivates so-called "after 21st century skills" among students. All top institutions enhance India's higher education landscape through practices such as global collaborations, inclusivity, and multi-disciplinary focus. These practices serve as valuable models of national education policy. The role of higher education must go beyond economic contribution and academic brilliance. HEIs must play the role of agents of social change and sustainable development, actively mentoring students to develop a feeling of responsibility towards the environment, patriotism, and service to the local community, as well as empathetic multicultural competency. Growth will be inclusive, sustainable, and sensitive to India's requirements thanks to this all-encompassing strategy.

Over the years, it has been realised that no nation can become self-sufficient, independent, developed, and efficient without a strong and dynamic higher education system. The higher education system has consistently promoted innovation, leadership, and national progress, as it can be traced back to ancient India's Vishwa Guru legacy to institutions such as the Ivy League, MIT, leading Chinese universities, and Oxbridge. These instances highlight the importance of the link between investments in the higher education system, research, innovation, and a country's prosperity. Higher education can help realize the goal of Viksit Bharat 2047 and provide the framework and strategy for India's growth, social fairness, and global leadership. The country can create a research-driven, competitive higher education system by achieving the objectives of NEP 2020 and blending its rich intellectual heritage with international best practices. The quality of education and leadership that graduates portray will determine the country's future, making India a knowledge superpower by 2047 rather than just the quantity of graduates.

2. Literature review

(Raj, 2025) have investigated the role of NEP 2020 in transforming higher education in India. The research emphasises that there are gaps in the Indian higher education system, such as inclusivity, especially for marginalized students who are deprived of opportunities for some reason. The findings reveal that educational challenges and inequality in the Indian higher education system still exist. A comparison between the Indian higher education system and Nordic countries reveals that both can share and learn from each other's approaches to equity and inclusiveness. Policy measures such as anti-discrimination policies, financial assistance, and expanded curricula to enhance access for deprived students and learners.

(Narwana & Gill, 2020) have explored the challenges faced by Dalit community students in Punjab's rural region with reference to their participation in higher education, addressing social inclusion challenges, financial constraints, and space sharing in the institutions. The study uses a case study methodology of a government institute in the Malwa region of rural Punjab. The findings reveal that cast discrimination and financial constraints are major areas where the Dalit students face challenges. The study highlights the necessity of a clear connection between Dalit youth's cultural orientation and the ir educational experiences, arguing that adverse experiences have a major influence on their identities.

(Ndibalema, 2022) has explored the challenges faced by the higher education system in developing nations during the shift to online learning during the COVID pandemic, highlighting digital inequality and the lack of technology. The findings reveal that the pupils resisted change due to fear and anxiety and experienced social-emotional challenges because of the transition to online learning. Low readiness, internet access, and competence were also highlighted as significant factors that affect online learning, among instructors and students. Institutional challenges acted as the major limitation to higher education during the transition phase, as it failed to manage learners' psychological and social well-being.

(Chatterjee, 2023) has used econometric analysis to investigate the difficulties Bengali rural education faced during the pandemic and students' willingness to adopt online learning. It highlights a knowledge gap about the socioeconomic variables affecting students' preferences and the efficiency of online education. Primary data of 1000 students revealed that 680 students preferred online learning despite several obstacles, demonstrating a positive mindset. However, the long-term viability of online learning in rural areas should be addressed. Additionally, the results suggest that online education can enhance the gross enrolment ratio in line with the National Education Policy.

(Trahar et al., 2020) has employed a participatory methodological approach to examine the disparity in access to higher education between rural and urban areas in nations such as Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Sweden, highlighting the challenges faced by rural students. The study identifies how rural regions affect access to higher education, with a special focus on low and high-income countries. The study reveals that finance is one of the major obstacles that affects the disparities between rural and urban regions. During the transition phase into higher education, family and community exert significant influence, and geographical isolation affects equitable education not only in lower-income countries but also in high-income countries. The study highlights the role of inclusive curricula and teaching strategies.

(Chakrabarti, 2009) has explored the determinants of higher education participation and the choice of discipline, focusing on social and economic factors, gender, and education cost, using the Multinomial Logit model with a focus on youth aged between 15 and 24 years. The findings reveal that youth belonging to the backward class, such as SC and ST, have lower participation in rural higher education. Urban female participation in higher education is profound, with enrolment in arts and humanities courses, while facing bias in other streams. Economic insecurity, rather than gender disparity, affects female participation, and additional siblings also negatively affect participation in education. Thus, access to primary education and rising education costs are major factors that affect students' participation in higher education.

(Tilak, 2015) has explored factors such as gender, religion, caste, region, and economic status to examine inequalities in higher education in India, during 1983 and 2009-10, using data from the National Sample Survey. The study reveals that despite some improvements, inequality in higher education persists due to various dimensions such as social groups, economic status, and gender. The research highlights that not only formal but substantial access to education is needed, addressing unfair inclusions and exclusions. Additionally, economic factors threaten students from dropping out after secondary education. The data also reveals that education access is still very unequal, with only 0.03% of the poorest enrolled compared to 52% of the richest, despite women's faster GER increase (12.2% annually vs. 5.7% for men).

(Björkum & Basic, 2024) have explored how students describe and share their conditions for university-level studies, using qualitative primary data, group discussions, and conducting interviews in Sweden, with a special focus on linguistic discursive representations and discourse analysis. The findings reveal that distance to education and choices in education are two significant elements that students describe. Additionally, prospective students and their linguistic representations were characterized by problems

and difficulties such as distance, uncertainty, and money, while acceptance and agreement regarding finding solutions and coping, indicating a balance between problems and acceptance.

(Roy, 2012) has highlighted issues in the education sector in India, particularly in rural areas, considering factors such as universal enrolment, quality, and retention, despite the right to education. The research identifies "lack of attention and resources" as a major gap in rural areas, especially in the implementation of ICT-based learning in such regions. The study aims to foster and improve educational standards in rural areas through an integrated ICT network, e-learning, and optimum utilization of local resources. The results show that students are discouraged from traveling to school due to challenges with infrastructure, inadequate buildings, energy, a shortage of qualified teachers, and transportation.

(Agrawal, 2014) has explored the issue of educational inequality in India by focusing on rural-urban disparities and their overall effect on human development, using data from NSSO. The study employs a decomposition method to analyse inequality using the Gini coefficient, having intra-group and inter-group components. The findings suggest that intra-sector inequality affects overall educational inequality negatively. Despite some positive changes, issues such as poor quality of education and lack of classroom activities exist. The paper also emphasises awareness among children and parents regarding the significance of education for human and societal development. The study examines the difficulties of educational reform in a culture that still upholds traditional ideas about gender roles and child labour, revealing a complicated sociocultural environment.

3. Objectives of the study

i. To identify major challenges and barriers in rural higher education based on existing literature.
ii. To study selected case studies highlighting initiatives taken to uplift higher education in rural India.
iii. To analyse the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of rural higher education in India using SWOT analysis.

4. Research Issue

The literature suggests that most studies focus on issues such as technology, access, and inequality. There is limited research on rural case studies, literature-based identification of barriers, and SWOT analysis to evaluate weaknesses and improvements. Additionally, past studies have focused on formal primary and

higher education, indicating a limited focus on non-formal rural higher education, which contributes significantly in the education sector. This study targets this issue by offering a comprehensive assessment of both formal and non-formal rural higher education in India.

5. Methodology

The study employs a descriptive, qualitative, and analytical research design to investigate the status of higher education in rural India. That data for the study has been collected from secondary sources such as the NITI AYOG report, All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2020-21, and published research papers.

In order to comprehend how various forms of higher educational institutions operate in rural India and how they contribute to the accomplishment of more general educational aims or goals, a case study technique has been employed. This further aids in understanding institutional practices, barriers, and outcomes concerning higher education in rural India. Additionally, SWOT analysis has been employed to investigate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in higher education. The analysis is based on insights drawn from case studies and literature review. The study aims to provide ideas for higher education in rural India.

6. Case Studies of Rural Higher Education Institutions

Case Study I: The "Rural University" Model: Gandhigram Rural Institute (GRI)

Established in 1956, Tamil Nadu, displays a model rooted in the Gandhian philosophy of *Nai Talim,* which means learning through work, social responsibility, and community engagement. The government of India considers it a rural institute, created to impart higher education to rural people by amalgamating research, instruction, and extension under one framework, fostering rural education. Retaining its strong rural orientation, the institute has transformed into a Deemed-to-be University.

The most important feature of the GRI is the integration of skill development and employability-oriented education within its academic framework. The institute offers vocational programmes that align well with the national skill qualification framework through initiatives like the Deen Dayal Upadhyay–Kaushal Kendra, in areas of rural and semi-urban labour markets, which include agriculture, food processing, textiles, renewables, and mechanical services. To enable students, the majority from marginalised and first-generation backgrounds, to acquire market-oriented and practical skills, the university's undergraduate and postgraduate programmes include Skill enhancement and ability enhancement

components. It not only supports national initiatives such as Skill India and Atmanirbhar Bharat but also aids in industry collaborations and hands-on training that further strengthen employability goals.

The institute's community-centred extension model, an important component, emphasises rural engagement as a core academic function rather than a peripheral activity. Students and faculty engage with rural communities to address issues regarding agriculture, sanitation, health, nutrition, environmental sustainability, and livelihood generation through programmes like the National Service Scheme, Village Placement Programme, Krishi Vigyan Kendra, and Unnat Bharat Abhiyan.

The uniqueness of the institute lies in its holistic and sustained commitment to rural transformation. Its academic programmes are interdisciplinary and rural-oriented, emphasising decentralized governance, rural growth and development, renewable energy, social inclusion, and sustainable livelihoods. Most importantly, the establishment serves village students, the majority being first-generation learners and women, and integrates community engagement, skill-based education, and rural-focused research.

Achievements

- During the assessment time frame, 947 students graduated from DDU–Kaushal Kendra programmes.
- Approximately 40% of the students got employed in private and public sector firms during 2019–2024.
- 31.3% of the graduates entered higher education in well-known national and international institutions.
- Reputed industries across sectors such as food processing, textiles, renewable energy, media, and manufacturing hired students from B.Voc programmes.
- B.Voc. Food Processing students were recognized as Tamil Nadu Student Innovators at the state level (2020).
- The employment of a B.Voc. graduate as a dairy technologist in Saudi Arabia is one example of an international placement outcome that demonstrates the importance of global skills.

Case Study II: Non-Formal and Vocational Education Model Supporting Rural Higher Education – Barefoot College.

Established in 1972, a non-formal, vocational, and community-based education model that complements rural higher education, it has been improving rural lives for over 50 years, aiming to make them sustainable and self-reliant. Meeting the educational needs of remote rural communities, their programmes include solar digital night school, day schools, the Children's Parliament, Digital Village Learning Centres for girls and women, and barefoot teacher training. Unlike a traditional university-like

model, it focuses on experiential education, grassroots learning, and social empowerment, especially among migrant communities, children, and women. One of the initiatives of the Barefoot College is a solar-powered digital night school designed for students aged 6-14 who are unable to access school education due to daytime work commitments, pulling them out of the illiteracy-poverty cycle.

It has activity-based learning and integrates numeracy, literacy, scientific awareness, democratic values, and environmental sustainability through local teaching aids. Barefoot College also offers formal primary education, blending the government curriculum with participatory and context-based teaching methods. Additionally, it reintegrates migrant and dropout children into mainstream education through the Residential Bridge School.

Most importantly, it mitigates gender specific educational barriers through Digital Village Learning Centres for rural girls and women. These centres provide access to digital resources, support competitive exam preparation, impart vocational skills, and offer entrepreneurship training in a safe, secure village environment.

Rural students reach higher education only if schooling gaps are reduced, access to digital resources is adequate, women and girls are trained in real-world settings, and skills are cultivated.

Despite lacking formal teaching degrees, the barefoot teachers are trained rigorously in classroom teaching and pedagogy, which reduces educational gaps in underserved areas.

Apart from education, the other focus areas of the Barefoot College are:

a) Water: increasing water security through modern technology, b) environment: fostering a clean and green environment with waste management, c) Solar: promoting the use of clean energy and helping women become solar engineers, “solar mamas”. d) Livelihoods: providing necessities such as food, clothing, shelter, education, and health, e) Health: improving health in rural regions, f) Communication: spreading awareness regarding the rich culture, education, and several other themes.

Such a holistic development approach is significant in fostering higher education and learning. The results of Barefoot College include:

- 250 Solar Digital Night Schools have been established in remote rural areas.
- Improvement in learning outcomes in day schools.
- Education access, digital skills, and vocational training for girls and women have increased.
- Integrating migrant and dropouts into mainstream education successfully.

- Imparted training to rural women from marginalised areas, especially in solar energy.
- Trained 14,000 plus grassroots teachers.
- 40% of the Barefoot children went to state-run schools.
- Community-led education programme benefitted 90,000 children, of which 55% are girls.
- The Digital Literacy Programme benefited 976 people.

7. Analysis and Discussion

The SWOT analysis is created by combining insights from the chosen case studies that reflect formal (Gandhigram Rural Institute) and non-formal (Barefoot College) educational approaches in rural India with the evaluated literature.

Strengths:

a) Firm support through NEP 2020, which focuses on vocational education, inclusivity, and access for marginalized students (Raj, 2025).
b) Existence of rural higher education, such as Gandhigram Rural Institute, that combines skills, employment, and most importantly, community engagement.
c) Combination of vocational and skill-based programmes that align well with the labour market needs.
d) Extension of activities that are community-centered, associating education with sanitation, rural development, health, agriculture, and sustainability.
e) Additional support from non-formal institutions like the Barefoot College, reducing schooling gaps and gender barriers while increasing access to digital resources.

Weaknesses:

a) Existence of social inequalities based on caste, subcaste, gender, and economic status restricting access to rural higher education. (Tilak, 2015), (Chakrabarti, 2009).
b) Financial barriers and poverty, leading to high dropout rates and low enrolment among rural marginalized students (Narwana & Gill, 2020).
c) Lack of digital infrastructure and access to the internet, specifically during the transition towards online learning (Ndibalema, 2022).
d) Lack of institutional capacity and trained faculty in rural areas. (Roy, 2012).
e) Limited academia-industry collaboration in rural institutions, affecting sustainable employability.

Opportunities:

a) Increase in gross enrolment and rural access through expansion of digital and blended learning models (Chatterjee, 2023).
b) Strengthening of vocational and skill-based education aligned with NEP 2020.
c) Collaborations of formal and non-formal institutions can act as a catalyst.
d) Digital empowerment and a greater focus on women as Digital Village Learning Centres.
e) Overcoming infrastructural barriers by using renewable energy for ICT-based learning.

Threats:

a) Constant urban-rural divide with reference to quality, access, and outcomes of higher education (Agrawal, 2014).
b) Sociocultural barriers such as discrimination relating to caste, gender, and early marriage.
c) Low readiness, anxiety, and limited institutional support during transition towards online learning.
d) Migration of young students to urban areas, reducing participation in rural higher education.
e) Relying on policy continuity and government funding poses challenges for rural institutions.

Progress in rural higher education in India, so far:

- Higher education enrolment rises to 4.14 crore, surpassing 4 crores for the first time; this is a 7.5% increase from 2019–20 and a 21% increase from 2014–15.
- Enrolment of women has reached 2 crores, up 13 lakhs from 2019–20.
- In comparison to 2014–15, there was a notable 28% increase in SC student enrolment and a 38% increase in female SC student enrolment in 2020–21.
- In comparison to 2014–15, there was a significant rise of 47% in ST student enrolment and 63.4% in female ST student enrolment in 2020–21.
- Since 2014–15, there has been a notable 32% increase in OBC student enrolment and a 39% increase in female OBC students.
- The North Eastern Region saw a notable 29% increase in student enrolment and a 34% increase in female student enrolment in 2020–21 compared to 2014–15.
- Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) has improved from the previous year for all socioeconomic groups
- Distance education enrolment rose by 7% in 2020–21 compared to 2019–20.
- In 2020–21, there were 70 more universities and 1,453 more colleges than in 2019–20.
- The Gender Parity Index (GPI) rose from 1 in 2017–18 to 1.05 in 2020–21.

- The total no. of instructors and academics increased by 47,914 between 2019 and 20.

TOWS Matrix

Grabbing the opportunities through strengths ➢ NEP 2020 support-Digital & blended learning ➢ Rural-oriented universities-Vocational pathways ➢ Skill-based education-institutional collaborations ➢ Community engagements – women's empowerment	**Mitigating threats through strengths** ➢ NEP 2020 support- Policy & funding risks, Digital exclusion ➢ Rural-oriented universities-Rural–urban gap, Sociocultural barriers ➢ Community engagement-Sociocultural barriers
Overcoming weaknesses and barriers, using opportunities ➢ Women's empowerment-Caste & gender inequality ➢ Institutional collaboration-Financial constraints ➢ Digital & blended learning-Digital divide ➢ Women's empowerment - Faculty shortages	**Avoiding threats and minimizing weaknesses** ➢ Digital divide-Digital exclusion ➢ Financial constraints-Policy & funding risks ➢ Faculty shortages- Rural–urban gap ➢ Caste & gender inequality-Sociocultural barriers

Source: Author's compilation

8. Suggestions

Higher education in rural India faces challenges, indicating that significant untapped potential and opportunities exist in the education sector. Suggestions from the SWOT analysis indicate that existing policies, such as NEP 2020, can be effective in enhancing digital and blended learning, ultimately reducing the digital divide and improving accessibility in rural areas. Rural-oriented institutions can play a crucial role in reducing disparities, promoting skill-based learning, and enhancing vocational education. Institutional collaborations can address issues such as financial constraints and a lack of faculty, as external funding opportunities and resource sharing may bring about qualitative improvements. These improvements, when integrated with skill-based learning, can promote employability and contribute to women's empowerment, achieving the objective of mitigating caste and gender related inequalities. Once women form a part of the system, it may further reduce employability issues. However, targeted interventions would be required for issues such as sociocultural barriers, regional imbalances, and digital exclusion. Additionally, initiatives that strengthen and foster community engagement can help smooth

the transitions in education reforms and promote inclusiveness. Disparity in educational quality in rural areas can be eliminated by providing incentives to the faculty in these regions. A transparent and stable funding mechanism is crucial in reducing financial risks and in achieving long-term sustainability. In fine, attaining inclusive, equitable, and sustainable educational growth requires a coordinated strategy that capitalizes on strengths, addresses weaknesses through new opportunities, and reduces possible risks.

9. Conclusion

Despite unconditional support for the education sector, higher education in rural India still faces challenges, including limited institutional capacity, social inequality, financial limitations, and digital exclusion. Several opportunities coexist alongside these challenges. A solid foundation for access and quality in rural higher education in India is provided by NEP 2020, with a focus on vocational and skill-based education, the growth of digital and blended learning resources, and the expansion of non-formal education. The case studies considered for the paper reveal that both formal and informal community-based educational models can successfully address educational needs and help resolve the problems linked with higher education. While institutions like the Gandhigram Rural Institute demonstrate how higher education can incorporate employability, skills, and community engagement, initiatives like Barefoot College play a complementary role by bridging educational and digital gaps and encouraging rural learners to pursue higher education.

In conclusion, improving rural higher education requires a holistic approach that addresses social and infrastructure gaps while matching institutional strengths with policy opportunities. Such a strategy is necessary to advance inclusive growth, improve employability, and accomplish sustainable rural development in India.

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