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Challenges facing HEIs in Rural India; A Case Study of Shri Bhairavnath Shikshan Prasarak Mandal, Landewadi

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Abstract:
The present case study is an outcome of the authors' ongoing doctoral research in the field of Education. While interacting with various primary and secondary stakeholders of Higher Education in India, as well as abroad, it was noticed that there is a rapid penetration of HEIs in rural belt of Maharashtra. Given that the scenario of Higher Education in many states and union territories of India is far from encouraging in terms of number of the HEIs per University, Gross Enrolment Rates, Dropout ratio, women participation and many other important factors that are vital to the Human Development Index (HDI).The case of HEI campuses of Shri Bhairavnath Shikshan Prasarak Mandal at the rural setting of Landewadi village, a relatively happening village, about 65 KMs away from Pune city hailed as the Oxford of East. It was found during the study that students not only from the surrounding villages, but from the urban dwellings of Pune and Mumbai are regularly enrolling to the HEIs of the campus catering to Management Education and Teachers Training. Upon further exploration, it was found out that the institutions are doing commendable work in promotion, implementation and follow up their chosen programs of higher learning. However, they are also fraught with challenges in terms of student engagement, teaching-learning outcomes and optimum utilization of the resources deployed.

Keywords: *Higher Learning, HEI ecosystem, Equity, Gender-Specific Training, Research Funding*

1. Introduction

Higher Education is third level or tertiary level in a learner's educational life cycle, where a youth after successful completion of Higher Secondary Schooling typically in Science / Arts / Commerce streams or post-secondary school Diploma in a professional/technical trade, pursues a three year or four year course in relevant discipline. These disciplines range across general, vocational, professional, and technical in nature. The Higher Education Ecosystem involves multiple channels to impart Higher Learni such as:

1. State / Central /Private University Departments established or incorporated by or under a Central Act, a Provincial Act or a State Act, and includes any such institution as may, in consultation with the University concerned, be recognized by the University Grant Commission (UGC) in accordance with the regulations made in this behalf under this Act.
2. Colleges/Institutions – affiliated / recognized with a State University
3. Deemed University - Deemed University refers to a high-performing institute, which has been so declared by Central Government under Section 3 of the University Grants Commission (UGC) Act, 1956.
4. Autonomous Colleges - not affiliated to / recognized with any University

Indian HEI ecosystem has been largely influenced by the western models imparting college education, which have many serious repercussions on the lifelong learning dimension of the system. Indian HEIs can be traced back to about 300 years of history, since the inception of first college of India was

established in the year 1818 by two Christian missionary individuals in West Bengal named as "Senate of Serampore" College. This was given a university status later in the year 1827. Since, the concept of higher learning was a gradual departure from traditional Gurukul's where typically students were trained on the premises of vedik knowledge, Upanishads, epics viz., Ramayana and Mahabharat, the holy Bhagawdgita. However, the crippling castiest practices and rampant discrimination against women and the so-called lower castes by certain communities, gave a strong reason for the hawkish European missionaries to promote their religion under the pretext of promoting social equality and justice. Thus, from 1800 till a recent past of the Indian HEIs, the ecosystem of college education is characterized by overemphasis on western principles/concepts, and English language. Further, there was a systematic effort by many missionary-operated educational initiatives to degrade Indian Knowledge System. Over a period, the Indian masses across the highly discriminatory society ridden with caste system, developed too many misconceptions on Indian traditional channels of education as well as the knowledge systems built on the premises of Vedas, Upanishads, Epics and the Bhagwadgita. On the contrary, many Europeans, and particularly, the British policy makers, historians, and academicians were lined up to systematically sabotage the Indian Education System. Eventually, our own scholars emerging during the 20th century in these fields, were conditioned to negate all the virtues of the Indian Knwoledge, and directly/indirectly contributed to reinforcing the western models of teaching-learning replete with many a lacunae and not coherent with the indigenous and proprietary knowledge.

It took more than six decades for the Indian masses and mass leaders to realize the above narrated scenario. Thus, college education typically provided in present day seems to be hollow, too much emphasis on rote learning and memorization, and over-emphasizes on post-education jobs. Almost 4-5 generations of the Indian subcontinent from mid 19th century to major part of the 20th century were brainwashed to disbelieve anything that is indigenous and hailed everything that is western.

The above historical perspective was necessary to be given in the introductory section, as the present case study on Shree Bhairavnath Shikshan Prasarak Mandal, Landewadi, is an academic effort to prove that when the institutions of Higher Learning promote the Indian Values among the students, their contribution to the society improves by manifold.

2. Significance of HEIs in rural development and regional equity

The efforts to take higher education closer to the rural setting have been taken by many educationists and institutions (government/non-governmental) in the pre-independent as well as independent India. All the universities established during the formative days of Higher Education in India were located in big cities viz, Senate of Serampore College / University of Calcutta, University of Mumbai, C University of Madra Chennai and few more. During the evoloving period of Higher Education in India, enrolments were miniscule. Trained and competent teaching faculty members were very few and many of them were from European countries. Thus, the Higher Education was confined to elites living in nearby cities or youth with extraordinary passion for further education.

The urban based HEIs even though were successful and all of them were bustling with vibrant academia, major chunk of the rural India remained deprived of the further education or dropout rates rampant among rural youth. The reasons were either obviously socio-economic in nature. The State and Central governments as well as the educationists were concerned with this trend. Thus, an idea of initiating rural-relevant and rural based HEIs was emerged. Some of the below mentioned Institutions have done remarkable achievements in this direction:

2.1 Agriculture Universities / Colleges

India boasts one of the world's biggest and most intricate agricultural research systems. The Imperial (Indian) Council of Agricultural Research was established in 1929 on the advice of a Royal Commission of Agriculture, and this process, which began in the 19th century, is credited with creating the Indian agricultural research system. The field of agricultural research in India has

developed since then. Established on July 16, 1929, the Imperial Council of Agricultural Research conducted research on cashew nuts, lac, jute, sugarcane, tobacco, oilseeds, and spices.

With the assistance of Lord Mayo, the fourth viceroy, and A. O. Hume (of the civil service of Bengal), a basic department of agriculture was founded in India in 1871 as the Department of Revenue, Agriculture, and Commerce. The Department was created to feed the starving Indian population and supply cotton to Manchester's textile businesses. In actuality, the colonial rulers' innate goal was to advance agriculture to meet the financial requirements of British capitalism. This hindered the autonomous growth of Indian agriculture, which would have met the people's economic needs.

The Indian Agriculture Research Institute (IARI) was founded at Pusa, Bihar in 1905. During the devastating famine that struck India in 1899–1900, Lord Curzon, the viceroy, focused on agriculture. Between 1868 and 1905, several agricultural colleges were founded throughout India to advance the agricultural industry. Agriculture colleges' primary duties were instruction and training; nevertheless, a shortage of funding and scientific and technical personnel prevented them from conducting research. In 1949, Dr. Sarvepali Radhakrishnan led the first Education Commission of India, which suggested that rural institutions in India be established under the American land-grant model. G B Pant Institution Agriculture and Technology, India's first state agricultural institution, was founded in Pantnagar (now in Uttarakhand). In 1959, a contract was formed with the University of Illinois to mentor the proposed university in UP. This cleared the path for the establishment of State Agricultural Universities in India, which are state-sponsored institutions specifically focused on agricultural education. In India, there are currently 54 State Agricultural Universities that support scientific farming, harvesting, distribution, storage, and water resource management techniques. The teaching, research, and extension missions of state agricultural universities are what define them, and they all have a significant impact on rural youth, who make up the majority of the Indian agriculture sector's stakeholders.

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2.2 Co Operative Education Training

The origins of cooperative education and training in India can be traced back to 1904, when Sir Frederick Nicolson emphasized the value of cooperative education in the official context of Indian schools and colleges by calling for "enlightened membership" in his report introducing the cooperative movement in India. Lack of cooperative education and training will significantly imperil the very advancement of the cooperative movement in India, according to the Edward Maclagan Committee of 1914 and other suggestions. As a result, the Committee encouraged the creation of cooperatives before cooperatives.

In 1935, a cooperative education and training committee was established. Sir Malcom Darling served as the committee's chairman. This committee is credited as being the first to suggest a planned program as a methodical approach to cooperative training and education. These proposals' primary focus is on a three-phase approach, specifically. program of instruction and training on cooperation for the trainers, particularly teachers and instructors. program of instruction and training for the cooperative department staff. program of education and training for regular members, MC members, and cooperative society personnel.

The 1946 Cooperative Planning Committee (Sarayya Committee) examined the advancements made in cooperative training and education thus far through the use of numerous programs. The progress did

not satisfy the Committee. It advocated for the establishment of cooperative colleges and the expansion of cooperative education in educational institutions. Additionally, the Sarayya Committee recommended that colleges provide facilities for advanced research and study on cooperation. It is undeniably clear from the aforementioned examples and situations that cooperative education and training are essential to the growth of the cooperative movement as a whole.

A Study Team was established by the Indian government in 1960 to carry out an in-depth analysis of the country's cooperative education and training initiatives. At the same time, a national summit of cooperation ministers was called to order in New Delhi. The National Board for Cooperative Education and Training was established as a result.

On July 1, 1976, the National Council for Cooperative Training, or NCCT, was founded with its main office in New Delhi in accordance with the 1973 Swaminathan Committee's recommendations. The NCCT is ultimately in charge of organizing and coordinating the nation's comprehensive cooperation training program. NCCT's main goal is to strengthen cooperatives' managerial structures. For graduate and postgraduate courses, cooperation ought to be an elective.

The NCCT has a three-tiered cooperative training system, with VAMNICOM at the top followed by Middle-level cooperative training colleges and the Institute of Cooperative Management (ICM). This leads to the lower-level junior training centres or subordinate training centres.

2.3 Institute of Rural Management Anand (IRMA)

The success of Operation Flood and its aftermath are closely related to the institute. It was founded in 1979 by Dr. Verghese Kurien, a former technocrat who became a social scientist and led the groundbreaking "Operation Flood," also known as the "White Revolution," which altered the way milk is purchased, prepared, and sold in the marketplace, changing the lives of millions of people. Large-scale programs involving millions of people were found to require rural management specialists with the necessary skill sets to handle the intricate rural environment. With the help of NDDB, the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC), the Government of India, the Government of Gujarat, and the former Indian Dairy Corporation, IRMA was founded in 1979 after Dr.Verghese Kurien, known as the Father of the White Revolution in India, took charge of the organization. The institution was re-fashioned recently as Tribhuvandas Sahakar University.

2.4 Spread of Professional Education Network to Rural India

There are roughly 1.45 billion people living in India, spread across both urban and rural areas. About 909.12 million people, or 65% of India's total population, live in rural areas, where the literacy rate is approximately 73.5%. In India's rural areas, 81% of men and 65% of women are literate. Since the rural economy presently accounts for 25–30% of the nation's GDP and we are making significant progress in eradicating illiteracy in these areas, ensuring the rural masses have meaningful involvement in the Indian economy is our next top goal. Only by increasing the number of young people from rural areas in our institutions and research ecosystem can this be possible. This can only guarantee that we will be able to develop indigenous answers for issues that are common in rural India in the fields of science and technology, education, healthcare, commerce, and the humanities.

The National Knowledge Commission chaired by Sam Pitroda has recommended setting up of 1500 universities in the country. This was done with the objective of extending the benefits of education to all the people of our country eligible for the same (Dr. Shantinath A. Baloj, 2021). Further, it should be noted that the intricacies of educational backwardness in general and higher education in particular were not well captured by the gross enrolment ratio as a lone literacy measure. A high prevalence of illiteracy, low enrolment, and a high dropout rate at the upper secondary school level have all been seen in emerging nations like India.

3. Research Methodology

The present case preparation has involved extensive consultation of major stakeholders in higher education viz. teaching fraternity and students. A checklist of questions was framed with an aim to understand what motivates/distracts students of HEIs to/from attending traditional modes of teaching-learning. Besides, the promoters & founders of many educational campuses were interviewed to gain clarity over real challenges of operating rural HEI campuses. The questions meant for students were administered through the concerned HoDs or principals to ensure maximum response rate. Convenience Sampling was chosen while selecting the HEIs. Whereas Snowballing method was adopted while choosing student respondents. Following is the breakup of various HEIs covered during the survey & first-hand data collection:

Sr. No.	Name of the District covered	No. of HEIs covered	No. of Students Respondents
01	Pune	10	250
02	Aurangabad	05	65
03	Kolhapur	05	72
04	Mumbai	O2	23
05	Ahmednagar	05	82

3.1. Discussion

Although, Maharashtra has relatively lesser number of Economically Backward Districts (7 out of 374 EBDs; compare this with about 40 EBDs in UP, 30+ in MP). Therefore, the spread of HEIs across humanities as well as professional education in Maharashtra can be termed as a great success. The state boasts of 47 universities including central, state, and deemed universities. Being the state with largest number of state managed Industry Parks named as MIDCs, the Maharashtra, undoubtedly attracts youth from all over the country in search of opportunities. Thus, enrolment to various courses offered by the Universities and affiliated HEIs are very good. However, there has been an erosion of competiveness in the enrolment processes and teaching learning processes over a period of last two decades. This has resulted in to a paradoxical situation where the enrolments are improving. But classrooms are either going empty or thinning daily attendance.

It is increasingly being felt that mere presence of Colleges / Institutes in a given district does not ensure quality of the higher education, neither the expected outcomes of the HEIs be achieved. The prevalence of dropout rates or absenteeism in junior colleges and HEIs in Maharashtra may be attributed to the following reasons:

a) Pursuing part time / fulltime jobs
b) Engagement in family business or occupation like farming
c) Lack of strict enforcement from the HEIs end.
d) No perceived ‘value for money’ of attending to HEI activities
e) Lack of family support
f) Miscellaneous Socio-Cultural reasons

4. Shri Bhairavnath Shikshan Prasark Mandal; a case for transforming Higher Education Landscape in the region

This case study is a corollary of the ongoing doctoral research of the author on Shree Bhairavnath Shikshan Prasarak Mandal (hereafter referred to as SBSPM) having its educational campuses at Landewadi of Ambegaon Taluka in Pune district. The educational society was established in 1987 with a humble beginning of a Marathi Medium High School, with a noble vision to reach higher secondary schooling to the surrounding villages, which had a visible school dropout rate especially among girls. Shri. Shivajirao, Adhalrao Patil, a self-made industrialist and three-time Member of Parliament, empathized with the local community and initiated the Marathi High School in 1987. Subsequently,

SBSPM started New English Medium School in 1998. The school has commanded reputation in the surrounding towns and villages for its gamut of skilled teachers, innovative pedagogy, and academic rigor. Further, in 2008, Shree Bhimashankar B.Ed. College was launched to train and provide skilled teachers to a battery of elementary, primary and secondary, and higher secondary schools. At this stage, the need to embark on professional education was felt, and eventually, Adhalrao Patil Institute of Management & Research came in to existence in the year 2009. The institute, in line with the Founder's vision, has been catering to the unique needs of students seeking managerial skills such as Communication, Leadership, Negotiation Skills, Computer & Analytical Skills, Team Building, and Stress Management. Deccan Maratha Junior College was established in the year 2016 to provide Higher Secondary and pre-college schooling to the rural youth and foster higher learning ambition among them.

Thus, the educational ventures of SBSPM are spreading in diverse streams with far reaching vision of bringing the world class education at different levels of children and youth on the solid premises of Indian Ethos and traditional values, finely intertwined with the learning needs of the present/future generation of youth.

The author has outlined a SWOT analysis of Shri Bhairavnath Shikshan Prasrak Mandal, covering all of its Higher Education initiatives as follows:

5. SWOT Analysis of SBSPM

5.1 Strengths

- Land is plentiful and less expensive than metropolitan campuses; there is space for growth, agricultural labs, and sports facilities.
- Goodwill in the community: Strong relationships with alumni, local officials, and panchayats facilitate outreach and service-learning.
- A calmer, safer setting for learning: Supports home models; reduces urban distractions.
- Industry exposure: There are fewer many local businesses /industries available for R&D collaborations, guest lectures, and internships.
- Context-rich learning: Fieldwork, live projects, and applied research are made possible by the close proximity to farms, MSMEs, and primary health facilities.
- Local talent pipeline: highly motivated first-generation students who have the capacity to improve entire families.
- Cultural capital: Humanities, Education, Management and social science courses are enhanced by regional languages, arts, crafts, and customs and practices.

5.2 Weaknesses

- Recruiting and Retaining faculty: It's more difficult to draw in PhDs and seasoned educators; problems with dual careers; and inadequate facilities.
- Connectivity gaps: Patchy internet, power reliability, and transport links affect teaching, research, and placements.
- Gaps in student readiness: English, digital, and math bridge courses may be necessary for first-generation students.
- Administrative capability: Admissions, compliance, AISHE, NAAC/NIRF, and funding are all handled by smaller teams.
- Financial limitations: Slower lab/library upgrades; greater reliance on fees and irregular donations.

5.3 Opportunities

- Skills that are very relevant and employable in the rural sector include aggrotech, food processing, dairy, fisheries, logistics, renewable energy, rural healthcare, and tourism.
- Support from the government and CSR: Labs and infrastructure can be funded by digital inclusion,

skill missions, rural development, and the CSR of surrounding PSUs and industries. Open and blended learning: Make use of online materials and SWAYAM; smart classrooms increase instructor capacity and allow for electives.

- Incubation and extension: FPO/FPC assistance; technology transfer; consulting to local entities; Agri-handloom/co-op incubators.
- Green campus advantage: Rainwater collection, biogas, and solar as living laboratories; reputation as a leader in sustainability.
- International and urban partnerships: short immersion programs, collaborative projects, and virtual exchanges allow exposure to both rural and urban areas.
- Community health and social impact: Departments of education, social work, public health, and nursing can conduct effective outreach that enhances learning.

5.4 Threats

- Out-migration and declining local cohorts: Students relocating to urban areas in search of jobs and perceived prestige.
- Competition from urban HEIs and ed-tech: aggressive marketing, hybrid degrees, and a supposedly superior return on investment.
- Volatility in policy and regulation: shifting financing standards, compliance burdens, and accreditation requirements.
- Climate and infrastructural risks: Attendance, labs, and programs related to agriculture are impacted by heat waves, floods, and droughts.
- Socioeconomic shocks: Changes in agrarian cycles in livelihood and the affordability of fees.
- Perception barriers: Preconceived notions regarding rural campuses have an impact on faculty interest and placements.

6. Futuristic Focus Areas

- **Gender specific Training & Student Engagement:** Looking at the overwhelming increase in female enrollment concurring with increasing rate of absenteeism, the HEIs under the auspices of SBSPM have decided to conceptualize more women-centric training programs to inculcate professionalism among the students. This would address the issue of general inconsistency and absenteeism among students.
- **Skill Development:** Besides, courses as prescribed by the affiliating university, emerging skillsets concerning Data Analytics/Visualization, Cloud Computing, Cyber Security applications of AI & ML are to be administered either through MOOC (e.g., NPTEL/SWAYAM/ Coursera) or traditional classroom/laboratory approach.
- **Employability:** A three-pronged approach of student grooming to cater to managerial/leadership roles, entrepreneurship or academic research positions. IN any of these employability areas, students will have to be nurtured with
  1. Technical / Vocational Skills: Concerning ‘how’ to do a job?
  2. Soft Skills: Concerning how to make the most of one’s technical competency for self-growth
  3. Life skills: How to co-exist with fellow employees with minimal/no conflicts and ensure organizational growth.
- **Fostering Research and Innovation:** Partnerships with NGOs, Government Agencies, Corporate Companies, SSCs to identify relevant research areas, increasing publications/consultations per faculty, and retention rate.
- **Funding and Partnerships:** Active Memorandums of Understanding, CSR, and targeting various funding agencies such as SPPU, AICTE, ICSSR to raise funding to facilitate research activities and lab/equipment additions.
- **Inculcating the culture of sustainability in the campus:** Increasing share of energy from renewable sources such as solar power, wind mills, water conservation per student, and green practices such as avoiding plastic, petrol / diesel, etc.

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- **Community Engagement:** Live projects, awareness campaigns, Parent Meets, Workshops concerning common citizenry, etc. to establish strong bonding between academia and society.

7. Conclusion

The author, during the course of writing this case, has undertaken extensive literature review and primary investigation with major stakeholder concerning higher education in the state of Maharashtra as well as other states. There are some striking revelations of operating an HEI in a typical rural setting. Prima facie it appears that bringing professional as well as Humanities education at UG and PG level has its own advantages. The foremost among them are improving on accessibility and achieving the last mile reach of HEIs to the hitherto untapped locations and population segments. This would certainly promote equity of HEI accessibility to marginalized and remote masses. However, the target audience of HEIs in these locations are fraught with their unique socio-economic challenges, which need considerable perseverance and tenacity from the HEIs. The case study of Shri Bhairavnath Shikshan Prasark Mandal's campuses of higher learning have shown that there is tremendous potential among the youth in the vicinity of the campus. This can only be channelized by customized approach in delivering a world class pedagogy and make the youth industry relevant and meaningful citizens of the society.

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