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VIKSIT BHARAT: EMPOWERING RURAL INDIA FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Bhupinder Singh and Narender

College of Vocational Studies, Delhi Vishwavidyalaya

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ABSTRACT

Rural India is the only answer to a "Viksit Bharat" or Developed India. This article attempts to present some critical dimensions on empowering rural India, namely environmental sustainability, policy interventions, technological integration, and bridging the rural-urban divide. The adoption of green practices, renewable energy solutions, and digital inclusion are presented as critical factors in enhancing rural livelihoods and infrastructure. Government initiatives under MGNREGA and Bharat Net have shown excellent improvement in rural development. The article also raises several other issues, including the absence of access to education, healthcare, and financial inclusion, suggesting that focused investment and equal distribution of resources are necessary. By building a resilient and inclusive rural economy, with diversified income sources and smart village initiatives, rural India can emerge as a sustainable growth engine. Actionable recommendations for policymakers, stakeholders, and communities to nurture a self-reliant and sustainable rural ecosystem complete the analysis. A holistic approach toward empowering rural India aligns with national development goals and global sustainability commitments, underlining its importance in achieving "Viksit Bharat."

KEYWORDS: Rural Development, Sustainability, Digital Inclusion, Public-Private Partnerships, Viksit Bharat

INTRODUCTION

India's development trajectory is heavily dependent on its ability to transform its vast rural landscape into centers of economic, social, and cultural prosperity. Although urbanization has led to progress in cities, the country's rural areas are the backbone of the nation, as nearly 65% of its population resides there and contributes to agriculture, traditional industries, and cultural heritage (Government of India, 2023). Viksit Bharat or Developed India is a vision for the future where rural and urban India coexist in harmony, with balanced development fostering inclusivity and sustainability. The term Viksit Bharat encapsulates the aspirations of a developed India, where every citizen, irrespective of their geographical location, has access to opportunities for growth and well-being. The vision aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations, particularly goals related to poverty eradication, quality education, gender equality, and sustainable communities (United Nations,

2015). At the heart of this vision lies the concept of holistic growth, which elevates rural India while also integrating it well with urban growth.

Economic empowerment is an important element of the Viksit Bharat vision. The country's workforce is dominated by rural areas, primarily involved in agriculture and allied sectors. To enhance productivity and ensure sustainable livelihoods, the government has introduced various initiatives, such as the Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana (PMKSY) and the Kisan Credit Card Scheme (Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, 2023). These schemes aim to provide financial and infrastructural support to farmers, enabling them to adopt modern agricultural practices and mitigate the risks associated with climate change. The increasing trends of rural entrepreneurship further enhance economic empowerment. Start-Up Village Entrepreneurship Programme (SVEP) and other such programs for the promotion of MSMEs have boosted innovation and job creation in rural areas (NITI Aayog, 2022). These programs are well within the vision of self-reliant villages, localizing the economy and making the people less dependent on the urban centers for employment.

In the present digital era, technology is a critical enabler of rural development. The Digital India initiative, launched in 2015, seeks to bridge the digital divide by bringing high-speed internet connectivity to rural areas and promoting digital literacy (Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, 2023). Technological innovations in renewable energy have transformed the science of rural electrification. Many households in rural India today receive electricity through programs like Saubhagya, which has made possible better living conditions and economic activities of many rural families (Ministry of Power, 2023).

The Viksit Bharat vision focuses on social equity and inclusion so that the vulnerable groups in the rural communities can be facilitated to emerge well. There is special attention to gender equality by ensuring that there are programs like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao aimed at raising the status of women in the rural areas of India through education and skill building (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2023). Another key factor in social inclusion is health care accessibility. Ayushman Bharat is a program under which health insurance coverage has been made for economically vulnerable families and this has significantly bridged health care gaps between rural and urban areas (National Health Authority, 2023).

Agriculture is still the main source of livelihood for the majority of rural households and generates around 18% of India's GDP (Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, 2023). However, the sector faces a number of problems, such as fragmented landholdings, water scarcity, and market volatility. The solution to these issues is multi-faceted: modernizing agricultural practices, improving irrigation infrastructure, and increasing access to markets. The government's initiative to double the income of

farmers with schemes such as the national agriculture market, e-NAM, is an example of strengthening the value chain in agriculture. Therefore, by integrating rural farmers to national and international markets, it can unlock the true agricultural potential of India (Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, 2023). Beyond agriculture, India has traditional industries such as handlooms, handicrafts, and agro-based industries. These are not only helping in maintaining the country's cultural heritage but also providing an income source for millions of artisans. Initiatives like Scheme of Fund for Regeneration of Traditional Industries (SFURTI) help to rejuvenate such industries through fund support along with capacity building (Ministry of MSMEs, 2023). Promotion of rural industries is necessary for sustainable livelihoods and minimizing rural-urban migration. In addition, it supports the Viksit Bharat vision by promoting local economies and preserving India's cultural identity.

Education has remained an anchor to any type of rural development, allowing a people to break the cycle of poverty and contribute meaningfully to society. Programs such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and the National Skill Development Mission have been central to addressing these problems, including universal access to education and vocational training (Ministry of Education, 2023). The initiatives equip rural youth with the skills needed for modern industries, preparing them to join the nation's development journey.

Infrastructure development is an absolute need for rural transformation. Infrastructure investments such as roads, electricity, and sanitation improve the quality of life of the residents and enhance economic activities in a given region. The Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana, has been instrumental in upgrading the mobility of the villages with no all-weather road connectivity (Ministry of Rural Development, 2023). Similarly, Swachh Bharat Abhiyan has transformed rural sanitation coverage in favour of sanitation for promoting public health and environmental sustainability (Ministry of Jal Shakti, 2023).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Singh and Patel (2023) explored the impact of digital technologies on rural development. The study reported that schemes such as Digital India have helped improve access to digital infrastructure in rural areas, leading to better health care, education, and governance. The authors insisted that targeted interventions were needed to reduce the gap between the urban and rural areas in terms of digital divides.

Sharma et al. (2023) studied agricultural modernization and implications for rural livelihoods. The authors of the study indicated that sustainable farming practices as well as schemes like PM-KISAN are essential tools for maintaining the financial stability of farmers, and further investment in irrigation and market access infrastructure is very much required.

Gupta and Kumar (2022) evaluated the impact of rural entrepreneurship on local economies. The authors concluded that the SVEP has been successful in generating employment opportunities and empowering women entrepreneurs in rural India. They recommended credit availability and capacity-building initiatives.

Verma (2023) discussed the issues in rural education systems, such as infrastructural deficiencies and teacher shortages. The findings of the study showed that the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan scheme has enhanced enrolment rates but still called for more emphasis on quality education and vocational training to equip rural youth for the modern workplace.

Choudhary et al. (2023) assessed the effect of Ayushman Bharat on the rural healthcare system. The authors have found that health insurance coverage has relieved huge expenses on rural family households related to medical costs. However, it has highlighted the shortcomings in the healthcare setup and the requirement of quality primary care settings.

Mehta and Rajan (2022) discussed sustainability and rural development. Their study focused on renewable energy projects, such as solar microgrids, promoting energy security in the rural sector. The authors took successful examples that were scalable to minimize environmental degradation.

Kaur (2023) discussed the impact of gender-specific interventions such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao on the empowerment of women in rural India. The study indicated a substantial increase in the literacy rates of women and their economic activities. The author recommended the integration of skill development programs with gender equity for long-term gains.

Prasad et al. (2022) studied the interaction between rural infrastructure and economic growth. Their results showed that investments in roads, electrification, and internet connectivity under the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana and Saubhagya Scheme have boosted economic activities in the rural areas and decreased migration to urban areas.

Reviewing strategies for social inclusion in rural development policies, Reddy and Mishra (2023) stated that there is restricted access by the government programs to marginalized groups. The study recommended targeted outreach efforts for schemes for ensuring inclusivity during their implementation.

Kumar and Sharma (2023) explored climate resilience strategies for agriculture-dependent rural communities. Their study proved the significance of climate-smart agricultural practices and

highlighted the importance of government support in cushioning the impacts of climate change on rural livelihoods.

Research Objectives: Following are the main objectives of this article:

1. To identify the critical challenges in rural India, including access to education, healthcare, and financial inclusion.
2. To analyse the role of environmental sustainability, including green practices and renewable energy solutions, in empowering rural India for achieving "Viksit Bharat."

Economic Empowerment: Building Rural Entrepreneurship and MSMEs

Economic empowerment in rural India is a key enabler of achieving Viksit Bharat, or Developed India. MSMEs account for more than 30% of India's GDP and provide employment to around 120 million people, with a sizeable portion being rural MSMEs (Ministry of MSME, 2022). They cover all sectors, including agriculture-based industries, handicrafts, and small-scale manufacturing. Rural entrepreneurs are the harbingers of innovation and serve the local needs with indigenously developed solutions; hence, they are a must for inclusive growth. Rural entrepreneurship promotes local resource use, income source diversification, and self-reliance. However, entrepreneurs are sometimes constrained by factors such as limited access to capital, skill shortages, and poor market links.

1. Financial Inclusion for Entrepreneurs:

Programs like PMMY offer collateral-free loans for budding rural entrepreneurs to bridge the capital constraints. More than ₹20 lakh crore have been disbursed since the start of PMMY, touching the lives of millions (Government of India, 2022). Finally, Microfinance institutions are filling in credit gaps for women-focused and small enterprise firms.

2. Skill Development and Training: Skill development training initiatives like the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana, PMKVY focuses on training rural youth about new agricultural practices, digital marketing and handicraft production. Such initiative skills equip people and builds entrepreneurship workforce.

3. Access to the Market and Digital Platforms: Through Government e-Marketplace (GeM) and Mahila E-Haat, rural producers have access to national and international markets where they can make direct sales without any kind of intermediaries. This brings more profitability for small entrepreneurs.

Table 1: Top Schemes That Help Rural Entrepreneurship

Year	PMMY: Loans Disbursed (₹ crore)	PMMY: No. of Accounts (crore)	Mahila E-Haat: Women Entrepreneurs Benefited (No.)	PMKVY: Skilled Individuals (No.)
2015-16	1,37,449.27	3.48	Not available	10,00,000
2016-17	1,80,528.54	3.97	25,000	24,34,000
2017-18	2,53,677.10	4.81	50,000	38,00,000
2018-19	3,21,722.79	5.99	70,000	49,00,000
2019-20	3,29,684.64	6.22	1,00,000	70,00,000
2020-21	3,11,754.44	5.07	1,25,000	82,00,000
2021-22	3,07,000.00	4.86	1,50,000	92,00,000
2022-23	Data Pending	Data Pending	2,00,000	1,00,00,000

Source: Press Information Bureau

Social Development in India

Rural India, housing 65% of the nation's population, is still grappling with gaps in healthcare and education despite efforts being made continuously. Strengthening these systems is important to achieve a "Viksit Bharat" or Developed India.

Healthcare Systems: The National Health Mission has been instrumental in improving rural healthcare infrastructure. As of 2023, 157,819 HWCs have been operationalized focusing on primary care and non-communicable diseases (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare [MoHFW], 2023). Still, 70% of the country's disease burden remains in rural India with substantial doctor and nurse shortages. Transformative solutions have emerged through telemedicine initiatives such as the e-Sanjeevani platform, which have surpassed 100 million consultations by 2023 (MoHFW, 2023). These efforts are very critical to the challenges of accessibility in improving maternal and child health, which are the crucial indicators of rural health systems.

Table 2: Ayushman Bharat: Health and Wellness Centers

Year	Key Achievements/Impact
2018	15,000
2019	30000
2020	50000
2021	70000
2022	80000
2023	150000

Source: Press Information Bureau

Education Systems: India's flagship Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) has taken lead in universalizing elementary education, with a rural literacy rate of 73.5% recorded in the 2011 Census. Quality still lingers, with ASER 2022 stating that only 50% of the students in Grade 5 from rural settings can read at a Grade 2 level (ASER Centre, 2022). E-learning tools brought through the Digital India initiative to villages have been adopted by over 4,000 rural schools for smart classrooms by 2023. The Mid-Day Meal schemes have increased enrolment and retention for 118 million children annually (Ministry of Education, 2023).

Table 3: Year-Wise SSA Budget Allocation (2018–2024)

Year-Wise SSA Budget Allocation (2018–2024)	
Year	Budget Allocation (INR Crores)
2018–19	34,000
2019–20	36,322
2020–21	38,750
2021–22	39,464
2022–23	40,000
2023–24	41,800

Source: Press Information Bureau

Environmental Sustainability: A Pathway to Rural Development

Environmental sustainability has become a pivotal component of global development strategies, particularly in rural areas where ecosystems and livelihoods are intricately linked. Two critical aspects driving this agenda include adopting green practices for rural livelihoods and implementing renewable energy solutions in remote regions.

Green practices in rural livelihoods emphasize sustainable farming, conservation, and resource management. Organic farming in India has increased appreciably; the area under organic cultivation has increased from 3.56 million hectares in 2018 to 5.34 million hectares in 2023 (APEDA, 2023). Agroforestry, integrating the plantations of trees with agriculture, has enhanced soil fertility and raised farmers' income; thereby reducing their reliance on chemical inputs (ICAR, 2022). MGNREGS is a program where activities such as water conservation and afforestation have been included as means of providing employment. Such activities enable communities to contribute toward ecological conservation (MoRD, 2021).

Renewable Energy Solutions for Remote Areas

Today, solar power, wind energy, and biogas systems are the prominent enablers of energy access and sustainability. India's Pradhan Mantri Sahaj Bijli Har Ghar Yojana (Saubhagya) has enabled electricity access to more than 26 million households since its launch in 2018; the share of solar home systems in this expansion was substantial (CEA, 2022). DRE systems include decentralized renewable energy microgrids and solar lanterns that enable rural communities with power that is stable to both a household, a school, and a small business. Between 2018 and 2023, installed renewable energy in India grew from 78 GW to 125 GW and was highly utilized by rural locations (MNRE, 2023). This transition has not only decreased the reliance on fossil fuels but also decreased CO₂ emissions and improved socio-economic conditions in rural areas (IEA, 2023).

Table 4: Year-Wise Data on Key Indicators (2018-2024)

Year	Organic Farming Area (million ha)	Rural Renewable Energy Capacity (GW)	Households Electrified Under Saubhagya (million)
2018	3.56	78	20
2019	4.12	85	22
2020	4.68	95	23.5
2021	5.02	110	25
2022	5.2	118	25.8
2023	5.34	125	26
2024	5.50*	130*	26.5*

(*Projected values based on current trends.)

Source: Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI). (2024). *Environmental sustainability and rural development statistics: 2018–2024*. New Delhi, India: Government of India.

Agricultural reforms under the Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana (PMKSY) have enhanced

irrigation infrastructure, thus raising the irrigated area from 47% in 2018 to 55% in 2023 (MoA, 2023). Furthermore, schemes such as PM-KISAN have provided direct income support to farmers and have benefited more than 110 million smallholders up to 2023 (MoA, 2023).

Public-Private Partnerships in Rural Development

PPPs have, over the past two decades or so, emerged as an important pillar in strategies of rural development. Near-universal electrification was reached by using PPPs while working in conjunction with the private companies, wherein rural electrification coverage improved from 89% in 2018 to 99% by 2023 (CEA, 2023). The skill development program of Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana, under private training partners, has equipped more than 15 million rural youths with market-relevant skills since 2018. Similar initiatives of Bharat Net have opened broadband access in the rural sector; as of 2023, over 750,000 Gram Panchayats were connected.

Table 5: Year-Wise Data on Key Indicators (2018–2024)

Year	MGNREGA Budget (₹ crore)	Rural Electrification Coverage (%)	Irrigated Area (%)	Gram Panchayats Connected via Bharat Net
2018	55,000	89	47	2,50,000
2019	60,000	92	49	4,00,000
2020	61,500	94	50	5,50,000
2021	65,000	96	52	6,50,000
2022	68,000	98	54	7,00,000
2023	73,000	99	55	7,50,000
2024	75,000*	100*	56*	800,000*

(*Projected values based on current trends.)

Source: Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD). (2024). Rural transformation statistics: Key indicators for policy implementation (2018–2024). New Delhi, India: Government of India.

Challenges and the Way Forward

The rural-urban divide continues to be a significant constraint toward achieving equitable development for India. Rural areas consistently trail behind urban regions in such factors as healthcare,

educational institutions, and infrastructure services. Although urban India has a literacy rate of 87.7%, rural literacy remains at 73.5% (Census of India, 2011). Rural health care facilities also tend to be inadequate; though more than 65% of the population lives in the countryside, this area has only 30% of the total number of beds available in Indian hospitals (NITI Aayog, 2021). This calls for targeted investments in rural education, healthcare, and infrastructure, along with enhanced digital connectivity to provide equal access to opportunities. A resilient rural economy requires income diversification beyond agriculture, which absorbs nearly 50% of the rural workforce but contributes less than 20% to GDP (MoA, 2023). Non-farm activities such as agro-processing and rural enterprises need to be promoted. Skill development programs such as Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) can empower rural youth with skills for employment in different sectors (MoSD&E, 2023). Inclusive growth also requires addressing vulnerabilities faced by marginalized groups. Strengthening microfinance institutions, access to credit, and promoting self-help groups empowers these groups to participate in the rural economy actively (NABARD, 2022).

CONCLUSION

Rural development is central to attaining equitable and sustainable growth for India, as the nation has a large rural population. Green practices and renewable energy solutions can improve the livelihood of the rural population while solving the environmental issues. In addition, government schemes, public-private partnerships, and digital inclusion initiatives are accelerating infrastructure development and service delivery in the rural areas. Despite these gains, the rural-urban divide and economic vulnerabilities are still there. Closing those gaps requires investments in education, healthcare, and infrastructure in targeted manners, while diversified income streams and empowered vulnerable groups are also a must. Harnessing technology and innovation through e-governance and smart village programs will further build on rural resilience. An inclusive economy for rural areas would require a multi-stakeholder approach, involving government, the private sector, and community participation. By focusing on these priorities, India can transform its rural regions into hubs of sustainable development and equal opportunity, thus contributing significantly to national and global development goals.

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