

# The Indian Rural Market : Emerging Opportunities and Challenges

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## Abstract

An estimated 68.84% of the total Indian population living in villages (Census 2011) makes rural India the 'next big thing' for businesses. The sheer size of rural India gives it a significant share in the total Indian market, which from the marketer's perspective, translates into a huge consumer base. However, just like everything else in India, rural India too is changing. Education, access to technologies, and a progressively increasing purchasing power is the new face of rural India. While such changes uncover new opportunities for marketers, these also lead to new challenges, which so often accompany change. Based on secondary data, this paper draws conclusions with the aim to understand the changing rural consumers and markets. It also aims to identify new opportunities and challenges faced by marketers precipitated by such change. This would allow businesses to formulate an appropriate strategy focusing on customization, relationship management, distribution and promotion, which prepares the marketers to tackle and benefit from such change.

**Keywords:** rural marketing, Indian rural market, Indian rural consumer, distribution, promotion, customization

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The rural market is the new driving force of the 'Indian Consumption Story'. With only 31.16% of the Indian population living in urban areas and 68.84% residing in the villages (Census 2011), it is only a matter of time before rural India takes its rightful place in the Indian growth story. Businesses are looking for new opportunities and avenues as a result of saturation in urban markets (Iyer, 2009). Developed markets represent a shrinking part of the world market (Mahajan & Banga, 2006). Faced with a threat of declining growth rates in future urban markets, these businesses have started focusing on the huge and relatively untapped rural Indian market. The major growth potential lies in the dense segment of lower income consumers in rural areas rather than in higher income consumers living in urban areas. By virtue of their numbers, the poor represent a significant latent purchasing power that must be unlocked (Prahalad, 2006). Additionally, as a result of rising non-farm employment opportunities coupled with government initiatives (such as MGNREGA) and private initiatives (such as ITC's e-chaupal, HUL's Project Shakti, etc.), the rural consumption growth rate in India has now surpassed that of urban India (CRISIL Report, 2012). Since the beginning of the economic reforms in India launched in the early 1990s, it is for the first time that rural spending in the country has outpaced urban consumption. According to preliminary data released for 2011-2012 by the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO), between 2009-2010 and 2011-2012, rural consumption per person grew annually at 19% - or at two percentage points higher than its urban counterparts. In absolute terms, the spending by urban India during this period was pegged at US\$53,607 million and spending by rural India at US\$67,144 million (CRISIL Report, 2012).

## Objectives and Approach

The analysis performed and the conclusions drawn in this paper are primarily based on the collection of secondary data. The approach undertaken involved collection of secondary data from various sources of publications,

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including magazines, books, journals, research articles, the Internet, and published and unpublished records of Government of India. The purpose of this paper is to achieve the following objectives:

- (1) To assess the potential of the Indian rural market.
- (2) To gain an understanding of the changing Indian rural consumer and rural markets.
- (3) To determine the major challenges and opportunities in the Indian rural market.
- (4) To offer a basic strategy for the marketer to adopt in the Indian rural market.

## The Changing Rural Market

There is a perceptible change in the rural consumers, brought about by access to improving educational facilities, increasing awareness, access to technologies, and a progressively increasing purchasing power. The increasingly consumption oriented rural India is a product of rising purchasing power, fuelled further by new employment opportunities (TRYSEM, JRY, and so forth), improved income from modern agriculture, better credit facilities (e.g. Kisan Credit Cards) and financial assistance schemes by the government. This, in turn, has provided an ideal foundation for rural market development. Such change also translated into changing rural lifestyles. According to a preliminary report based on the 68th round of the consumption expenditure survey carried out by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), income in rural India grew at a much faster rate between 2010 and 2012 than in the previous years. The rising income levels in rural India have quite noticeably transformed the rural consumers, and their changed nature of demand is forcing companies to offer better quality, better service, greater choice, and true value for money. Product quality has emerged as the primary factor that determines brand loyalty in rural markets (Banumathy & Hemameena, 2006). In terms of prosperity, extreme rural poverty is projected to drop to 26% by 2025, a massive decline of 68% from 1985 levels (Beinhocker, Farrell, & Zainulbhai, 2007).

By 2025, the Indian rural market is expected to grow more than tenfold, to become a US\$100 billion opportunity for retail spending (Manwani, 2012). However, the actual potential of the rural economy exceeds the official estimates, since there is substantial bartering and a sizeable informal economy, which does not appear in official statistics. Consequently, the low figures for per capita income underestimate the actual standard of living as well as the ability to purchase non-food items (Craig & Douglas, 2011). According to Beshouri (2006), the size of the rural Indian market is estimated to reach US\$577 billion in twenty years, which is larger than the total consumer markets in countries such as South Korea or Canada, and is almost four times the size of the urban Indian market today. This means that businesses can no longer ignore rural markets and 'going rural' is not just an option, but a business necessity for businesses operating in India.

## Analysis of Rural Markets In India

To gain deeper insights into the Indian rural markets and to understand the challenges and opportunities that exist in such markets, it is necessary to analyze both internal and external conditions prevalent in the rural markets. Only after such an analysis, the challenges can be identified and appropriate strategies can be formulated.

➤ **Internal & External Analysis:** An analysis of the Indian rural market reveals that its greatest strength lies in its largely untapped consumer base of 742 million consumers. A market with such promising potential cannot be ignored by businesses. The progressively rising income and consumption levels further add to the attraction of this market. Improving connectivity with urban India, increasing media penetration, and rising literacy levels have resulted in greater product awareness, making marketing in rural India easier and more effective. The presence of fewer players in rural markets means that businesses that take the lead in establishing rural operations would face little competition in the early years. This makes it prudent to enter these markets at the earliest. Also, the ever increasing government focus on developing rural India through access to better education, better roads (e.g. PMGSY), greater employment opportunities (e.g. MGNREGA), easy credit availability (e.g. Kisan Credit Cards),

and so forth further enhances the future potential of the Indian rural market.

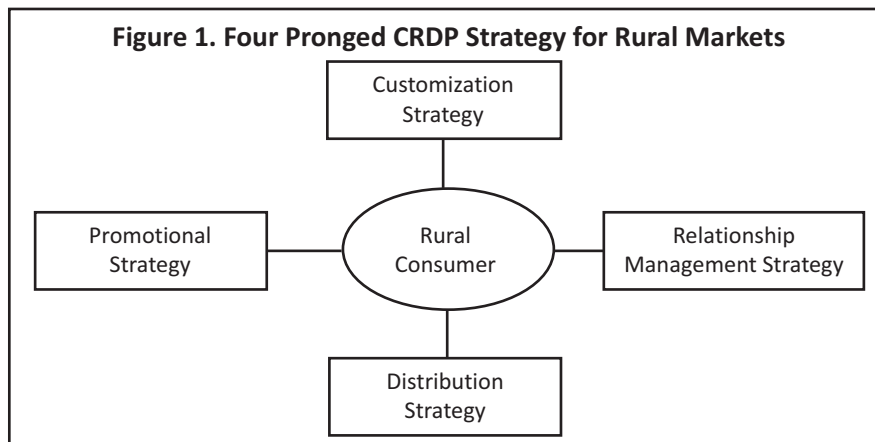
While the above mentioned benefits and opportunities existing in the Indian rural market are a significant source of attraction, however, at the same time, businesses cannot ignore the risks and apprehensions associated with rural markets. The Indian rural sector has just started developing, and while the future looks bright, the prevailing situation in rural India is characterized by an absence of sufficient infrastructural facilities, which makes investments by new businesses risky. Poor media penetration and low literacy rates in rural India are significant obstacles to any marketing effort. Such conditions, coupled with rising yet still relatively low household income, sparsely located population, and frequent language variation across villages make marketing in rural India all the more difficult.

## Marketing Challenges

A clear conclusion, which can be drawn from the above analysis, is that while the immense potential offered by rural markets is a huge attraction to businesses, yet, from the marketer's perspective, entering the market and taking a sizeable share of the rural market is just as significant a challenge. The analysis reveals that in spite of the recent growth and a promising future, at present, the rural markets are weighed down by inadequate infrastructure, lack of proper linkages for roads and railways, and limited electrification and telecom connectivity. Fragmented demand pattern further adds to these challenges. Another serious concern is the enormity of upfront investments in establishing rural operations. For example, according to Accenture Research Report published in 2010, ITC's 'e-choupal program' required setting up of 4100 kiosks (containing a computer with a V-SAT connection), which translates into an average initial investment of US\$20.5 million and a variable cost of US\$0.4 million each year. Overcoming some of these barriers is possible only through sustained intensive government support, and solutions to such issues may lie well beyond the marketer's reach.

However, challenges that result from the marketer's failure to understand the rural market place and the rural consumer can be overcome. A common folly is to 'practice' rural marketing without understanding the 'rural mindset'. Marketers may approach rural markets with preconceived notions, assumptions, generalizations and stereotypes, which influence their practices, leading to mismatched marketing programs and flawed promotional and distributional strategies. Marketers need to make their understanding of the rural markets and rural consumers more real, by setting aside the common myths and replacing them with deeper insights through sincere efforts to 'think rural'. For instance, the belief that the rural market is a homogeneous mass needs to be dispelled, because, in reality, it consists of a heterogeneous population. Landlords, traders, farmers, labourers, artisans, and so forth form the various tiers of the rural society. Such heterogeneous nature of the rural population was reaffirmed by Census 2011 and other official data, which showed state wise variations in rural demographics in terms of literacy (Kerala : 92.98% , Bihar : 59.78%) and population below the poverty line (Chhattisgarh : 56.1% , Puducherry : 0.2%).

In a country like India, with its linguistic, cultural, and social heterogeneity, a uniform marketing strategy is not



feasible. As per the 1991 Census of India, there were 1576 mother tongues with separate grammatical structures and 1796 languages classified as 'other mother tongues'. Similarly, there are substantial regional differences in cultural values and social mores limiting the use of similar marketing approaches and appeals. People or consumers in each region have their own set of idiosyncrasies and dogmas, which are deeply rooted in their rituals and customs. So, what would apply to one, would in all certainty, not apply to another set of consumers in a different rural region (Siraj & Sharma, 2009). For example, attitudes toward the role and status of women differ, impacting the use of appeals to women or creating barriers to the employment of women as distribution agents or in personal selling roles (Rangan & Rajan, 2007).

In light of the marketing challenges discussed above, an effective strategy needs to be formulated and implemented, which must be devised after duly considering the special conditions of rural markets. As an attempt in this direction, the following four-pronged strategy is suggested (Figure 1) to enable the marketers to face the challenges offered by rural markets:

**(1) Customization Strategy :** Marketers must understand that rural markets differ significantly from urban markets, and as such, require a marketing approach that suits the specific rural market conditions. Marketers often ignore this and only make minor modifications to products, positioning, media strategies or alternatively add local product variants (Dawar & Chattopadhyay, 2002). Businesses must avoid the unsound practice of designing products for the urban markets and thoughtlessly pushing the same into rural markets, without any regard for the local rural preferences. For instance, in terms of pricing, businesses need to understand that low-income levels and irregular income patterns, which characterize rural markets, also imply high levels of price sensitivity. In rural areas, substantial demand potential often exists at levels below those of international price points (Dawar & Chattopadhyay, 2002). Therefore, to offer a lower price, businesses may reduce the volume of products, offering smaller packages in rural markets, making them affordable. For example, HUL successfully launched a variant of its largest selling soap brand, Lifebuoy priced at ₹ 2 for 50 grams. Customizing the product to fulfil the specific needs of the rural consumer is essential if businesses desire to build a long-term relationship and gain a strong foothold in rural markets. Realizing the importance of such a strategy, Philips developed a TV 'Vardaan' for Indian rural markets facing problems of low voltage. It operates on a voltage of 90-270 volts. Similarly, Nokia developed affordable mobile phones for rural markets, with the unique feature of local language capabilities.

**(2) Relationship Management Strategy :** The growing interest of businesses in rural markets also means stiff competition between businesses in the future. In such a scenario, the significance of maintaining a strong relationship with customers cannot be overemphasized. Businesses need to build a closer relationship with the rural consumers, through association with ideas and traditions, which are in tune with the rural mindset. To achieve this, various folk traditions may be utilized to reach rural consumers in their own language and in ways that are not alien to them. This would allow the rural consumers to identify with the brand and associate the brand with popular rituals, occasions, celebrations, festivals, and other activities that are integral to rural life. This would, in turn, ensure that businesses integrate into the rural market and gain a firm foothold.

**(3) Distribution Strategy :** Distribution is the vital link between businesses and consumers that determines their success or failure, especially in rural settings. Distribution, in case of rural markets, poses its own problems. Major companies are incurring huge costs to make their products available in the 3.5 million rural outlets (Bhoyar & Nagendra, 2012). Geographic dispersion coupled with lack of an effective distribution infrastructure requires radical rethinking of traditional marketing strategies. It calls for development of new and more creative approaches to tap the latent potential in these markets (Craig & Douglas, 2011). The lack of an effective marketing and distribution infrastructure means that creative low-cost distribution strategies must be designed to reach these consumers efficiently (Craig & Douglas, 2011).

Businesses could capitalize on the local rural tradition of annual 'melas', which are quite popular with rural consumers, and as such, provide an excellent distribution platform for businesses. The Indian Market Research Bureau estimated that the number of such rural annual 'melas' to be close to around 8000, which showcases their

distribution potential. Rural markets have another peculiar tradition, which is of significance from the marketer's perspective. This is the practice of designating specific days in a week as market days called 'Haats', when exchange of goods and services are carried out. This could serve as another potential low cost distribution channel accessible to the marketers. Besides, agricultural markets called 'mandis' act as satellite towns, serving each region composed of several villages. Expanding the scope of these agricultural markets, rural consumers prefer to make purchases of durable commodities from such 'mandis'. As such, marketers could utilize these feeder towns to cover a significant portion of the rural population, thereby reducing the cost and effort involved in distribution. A major area of concern for companies is to make their products available in the remotest corners of the 6 lakh villages in the country (Bhoyar & Nagendra, 2012).

To achieve deeper penetration into rural markets, businesses may extend their reach to remote villages using auto rickshaws, bullock-carts, and even boats. This would not only extend their reach, but also help save fuel and cut costs. An alternative to this could be a syndicated distribution, involving a symbiotic tie-up between non-competitive businesses, so as to achieve the objective of improved distribution, without putting unnecessary strain on their limited resource base. For businesses with sufficient resources, a network of delivery vans may be established, allowing timely delivery of products to the rural consumers in faraway locations, thus achieving the dual objective of enhancing reach as well as establishing a direct contact with them, which is essential for any successful marketing initiative.

**(4) Promotional Strategy :** Promotional strategy in any rural setting must be planned carefully to convey a message, which appeals to rural consumers. It must consider tastes and preferences that are specific to rural markets. A major portion of the promotional strategy must be dedicated to the rich traditional media forms like folk dances, folk recitals, puppet shows, and so forth that the rural consumers identify with. In addition, marketers may make use of hoardings, wall painting, street plays, musicals, temple festivals, and so forth to enrich rural marketing campaigns. Such an approach is necessitated by the limited reach of media, which are otherwise successfully used in urban markets. For instance, only 16% of the rural population has access to a vernacular newspaper (Patel, 2013) and the reach of electronic media, although rapidly increasing, is yet to reach desirable levels. In such a scenario, the marketers must carefully choose the medium to be used for communication. An urban approach of relying excessively on electronic and print media would lead to unnecessary wastage of resources, without achieving the desired results. Even in situations where electronic and print media is used, the marketer needs to be sensitive to the 'rural mindset'. Greater familiarity and higher comfort level with traditional rural media translates into high impact product campaigns.

To further the object of 'relation through customization,' direct marketing should be emphasized as an element of rural promotional strategy. Businesses must establish teams of rural marketers, who are well trained in dealing with the rural consumer. These marketers must have a clear understanding of the languages, tastes, preferences, customs, beliefs, traditions, emotions, and sensitivities of rural consumers. This would enable these marketers to handle activities like door-to-door sampling, marketing, and product promotion effectively, while strengthening the customer relationship in the process. Marketers may further improve the effectiveness of their promotional activities through special discounts offered during sales campaigns, which coincide with the harvest seasons, when the rural population visits markets to sell their produce. The improved purchasing power of rural consumers during the harvest season could thus be tapped, to ensure a successful sales campaign, while supplementing the distribution strategy of using agricultural markets.

## Conclusion

While rural consumers in emerging market economies offer tremendous potential, yet, capitalizing on this potential necessitates the formulation of a well thought out and creative strategy, which focuses on such essential aspects of marketing, such as the product suitability, relationship building, promotion, and distribution. Mere modification and extension of existing urban marketing plans to rural markets would not serve the purpose.



However, any such strategy has to be based on a deep understanding of rural markets and consumers. Insights into the workings of rural markets and the psyche of rural consumers, therefore, need to be gained, so as to understand them better. Based on such an understanding, marketing strategy needs to be developed *de novo*, so that the peculiar needs, tastes, and preferences of rural consumers, and the specific characteristics of rural markets are managed effectively. However, while doing so, the primary business objective of profitability cannot be overlooked. To maintain desired profitability, innovative and low cost alternatives to distribution must be developed.

This calls for utilization of local cost efficient alternatives, which are readily available. Using the local traditions and customs to achieve promotional goals also serves the purpose of enhancing profitability. Ensuring focus on creating a long term relationship with rural consumers is equally significant. Such long term relationships would ensure that businesses develop a strong foundation and deep roots in rural markets in which they operate. This would ensure long term survival and growth of such businesses in the rural market. The government also needs to play a positive role in the development of rural markets in association with the local NGOs. Improving infrastructural capacities, initiating community development programs, offering better employment opportunities, simplifying credit availability, and so forth would make such markets even more attractive. The future of businesses operating in India lies in rural markets and those that fail to accept and adapt to this fast approaching reality run the risk of being rendered irrelevant.

## **Managerial Implications**

Going rural requires a strong and sustained commitment to the cause by the management. More importantly, such commitment should flow from the top and percolate to the lowest levels of the organization. Through consultations, detailed discussions, and organization wide awareness programs, managers at all levels should be made to understand the importance of going rural.

Businesses that intend to move into the appealing Indian rural market need to understand that it is a strategic move with long term implications. Initiating rural operations based on tactical requirements of improving short term sales is to underestimate the uncertainties of these emerging rural markets. Businesses need to invest enough time and resources to understand the rural consumer. Investments on conducting marketing research in targeted rural areas is of utmost importance. This would not only allow the businesses to understand rural markets in general, but also help understand the nature and degree of heterogeneity prevailing in specific rural markets. Market surveys would also help understand consumer preferences, thus allowing businesses to target specific rural markets based on their own strengths. Such research would form the basis of the suggested 'customization strategy'. However, it should be emphasized that such marketing research and surveys need to be conducted regularly, rather than being a one-time affair. This would help businesses remain updated regarding the rapid changes that characterize rural markets, thus keeping them relevant.

Businesses must also keep track of the technological environment prevailing in the targeted rural markets through research, reports, and data published by government and other agencies such as IAMAI (Internet & Mobile Association of India), IMRB International (Indian Market Research Bureau International), and so forth. This would ensure the formulation of a dynamic promotional strategy with the right blend of the traditional and electronic media mix, based on the prevailing degree of technology penetration in the targeted rural market. This would ensure that the promotional strategy is in harmony with changing market realities.

Being in its infancy stage, an 'early mover' advantage in the Indian rural market could be converted into market leadership through proper 'relationship management'. Recruiting sales force from local rural labour markets would ensure a culturally sensitive work force. Such a local connection would act as a bridge between businesses and their rural consumers. This relationship can be further strengthened by educating and sensitizing marketers to local rural traditions, customs, tastes, and preferences through specially designed training programs. This becomes all the more important in view of the fact that marketers are representatives of the business and form the visible face of businesses. A rural oriented promotional strategy would go a long way in touching the hearts of the rural consumers and help rural consumers identify with the products of the business. Such focus on development of a strong and a

long-lasting relationship with rural consumers would progressively improve the customer base, ultimately leading to market leadership.

## **Public Policy Implications**

The challenges facing the Indian rural market are difficult for marketers or firms to handle single-handedly. The task is significantly huge and complicated, and as such, implementing a marketing strategy alone is not sufficient. An effective approach requires collaborative efforts involving various government departments, agencies, and even NGOs. To begin with, there is a dire need for strong and pro-active government policies to develop rural infrastructural capacities. Restricted physical access, limited transport facilities, and deficient market infrastructure in many rural areas adds to the already high transportation and distribution costs. Providing adequate connectivity and developing market infrastructure, therefore, is of paramount importance. New government schemes on the pattern of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) should be implemented, providing the twin benefits of local infrastructural development and improving purchasing power through local employment generation. This would not only increase access to rural markets, but also make them more attractive for firms initiating rural operations.

Another impediment in the development of rural markets, that requires government intervention, is insufficiency of credit facilities and complex procedures set by existing credit supplying agencies. Government efforts at improving credit facilities and streamlining credit availing procedures by simplifying them and making them market friendly would go a long way in developing these markets. Involving NGOs would help the government to reach out to credit seekers at the grass root level, thus bringing efficiency to the initiative. The lack of educated and skilled labour is yet another hurdle faced by firms initiating operations in rural areas. In this area also, the role of NGOs cannot be overemphasized. Literacy and skill development programs run by the government, in association with local NGOs which operate in rural areas, can be very effective in the development of educated and skilled labour. This would facilitate availability of the much-needed skilled labour in rural areas, significantly reducing labour costs for firms operating in rural markets. Improved education levels, achieved through such programs, would also enhance the responsiveness of rural consumers to media campaigns, which would otherwise be incomprehensible to the uneducated rural consumers. Such a proactive role by the government, in tandem with NGOs, would boost the effectiveness of the marketing initiatives introduced by firms in rural markets, attracting new players into these markets.

## **Limitations of the Study and Scope for Further Research**

The study is based entirely on analysis of secondary data, and as such, all limitations inherent to the primary data directly affect the reliability and validity of the secondary data. The limitations of conducting research in low literacy rural settings limits the validity and reliability of the collected data. Furthermore, there is a time lag between the collection of data and its subsequent analysis for the purpose of this study. Any changes in the market during this period, therefore, are not reflected in the study. The present paper has focused on the Indian rural market alone and there is ample scope for a deeper research involving a comparative analysis of rural markets in other countries with large rural populations such as China, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. A research in this direction would lead to a better understanding of rural markets across geographic locations. This would also provide a means of analyzing the strategies and programs employed by various organizations and governments internationally to tap the full potential of rural markets. It would also provide an opportunity to study the effects of global changes on rural markets in different countries. This study only considers marketing of products to rural areas, thus only considering the rural population as consumers. It does not deal with rural products that need to be marketed elsewhere, and as such, ignores the production side of the rural economy. This aspect of the rural economy may, therefore, be incorporated in a future study to give a holistic perspective of the rural economy considering both consumption as well as the production side.

In addition, this study is purely based on secondary data, and as such, incorporation of primary data in a future research study would substantiate the conclusions drawn here. Such a research based on primary data also has the potential to uncover new aspects and give birth to new perspectives that have been overlooked thus far.

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