

Rural Consumer Behavior and Strategic Marketing Innovations: An Exploratory Study in Eastern India

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Abstract

Rural India, of late, has received much desired attention from the marketers given the fact that the urban markets have either become saturated or sales have leveled off. Furthermore, given the fact that more than 60% of the Indian population lives in rural areas, it became worthwhile to investigate rural consumer behavior. The study also explores whether innovative marketing activities of firms targeted towards the rural consumers are meeting the criterion of affordability, accessibility, availability, and awareness. The present study addresses these research questions with the help of an exploratory study conducted across four villages in the state of West Bengal, India. The major findings from the study indicate that: 1) media used for advertisements or awareness differed across occupational categories, 2) grocery purchase is mostly on credit in contradiction to what is generally believed, 3) consumers were, at most, willing to travel 12 km to purchase grocery items, 4) consumption level may not be low, but low disposable income leads to purchases in small amounts, and 5) innovative marketing activities undertaken by firms in rural areas, though they meet the accessibility and awareness factors, are affected by problems related to affordability and availability, which act as major hindrances for the rural consumers.

Keywords: rural, consumer buying behaviour, innovation, exploratory survey, correspondence analysis

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Marketers frequently look at the rural markets when they are faced by dwindling sales or saturation of the urban market. The decision of the marketers to enter the rural market is often constrained by the fact that what the marketers see is only a large mass of individuals and not a sizeable number of consumers (Gaikwad, 1973 ; Velayudhan, 2005). One of the primary reasons why marketers face such a situation in the rural market is because of the lack of knowledge about rural consumer behavior. Applebaum (1951), in his seminal paper on customer behavior in retail stores, emphasized that a marketer should gain sufficient knowledge on consumer behavior before planning any marketing activity like price promotions, advertisements, and so forth. Knowledge about rural consumer behavior becomes all the more important in a country like India, because according to the Census 2011 published by the Government of India, the rural population accounts for 68.84% of the entire population, while the urban population accounts for only 31.16% of the same. Also, rural India accounts for 50% of India's GDP. Moreover, of the total demand for FMCG and consumer durables, nearly 53% and 59% respectively come from rural India (Paninchukunnath, 2010).

The primary motivation behind this study was to identify the pattern of rural consumer buying behavior. The buying pattern of the rural consumers provided us with some directions regarding the values, beliefs, and attitude prevalent among the rural masses. This could be a significant insight as it updates the knowledge about the rural consumers' buying behavior to the marketers. The study also explored whether the four factors of strategic marketing innovation namely: Affordability, accessibility, availability, and awareness as identified by Anderson and Markides (2006) were at all present in some form in the rural market and whether the rural consumers were getting any benefit from these four factors of innovation.

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Literature Review

✍ **Defining the Rural Market :** Academia, since long, has been interested in developing theories and policies primarily catering to the rural market (Aneja, 1993 ; Modi, 2009; Nagaraja, 2004 ; Vaswani, Aithal, Pradhan, and Sridhar, 2005). The fundamental considerations of all these excellent contributions from the marketing and economics stream of researchers was in providing distinct theories and policies for the rural market and the rural consumers. However, one of the primary limitations prohibiting the growth of rural marketing as a separate discipline was that there was no consistency among the researchers when it comes to defining terms like 'rural market,' 'rural consumers,' and 'rural marketing'. According to the Census 2011, published by the Government of India, an urban area is defined as follows:

- a) All statutory places with a municipality, corporation, cantonment board, or notified town area committee, and so forth.
- b) A place satisfying the following three criteria simultaneously,
 - i) Having a minimum population of 5000 persons,
 - ii) At least 75% of the male working population is engaged in non agricultural pursuits,
 - iii) A density of population of at least 400 persons per sq. km. (1000 persons per sq. mile).

A rural area is thus one which doesn't fall in the above definition. Though such a definition is essential and empirically followed for identifying the rural- urban profiles in any country, but according to Meserole (1938), marketers should be cautious while using such a definition. The producers, retailers, distributors, and marketers should read between the lines of the available data to exactly delineate the rural market. For example, a rural market surrounded by a handful of towns should be much more attractive than a rural market which exists far off from urban centres. Again, when a marketer introduces a product in the rural market, which was successful in the urban market, without considering the needs and constraints of the rural consumers, it is bound to face failure. Such an approach is termed as 'sink or swim' (Aneja, 1993). If the product succeeds, the marketer is there to stay, otherwise, he leaves. This attitude of the marketer may be true when the urban market has been enough to offer in terms of sales growth, but the dynamics have changed in favor of the rural market as urban markets have become saturated (Gaikwad, 2010), and marketers are mostly uncertain of the rural market. Again, literature in aplenty has been devoted to the million-dollar question of 'who is the rural consumer?' Most of the studies have considered the occupation of the chief wage earner as the basis to define rural consumers (Bijapurkar & Murthy, 1999 ; Velayudhan, 2005). These studies classified the rural population into categories - like owner farmers, shopkeepers, service holders, agricultural workers, unskilled non agricultural workers, artisans, and others.

In a separate study, Gaikwad (1973) categorized rural consumers into six categories- a class of proprietors of land, a small group of rich farmers, a class of small peasants with tiny uneconomic holdings, a class of tenant farmers, a growing class of agricultural labourers, and a class of ruined artisans and others. These categorizations have helped in classifying the rural consumers' primarily on an occupational basis or on the basis of the principal wage earner of a rural family. However, the crux remains whether marketers are really aware of the rural consumers and their purchase behavior.

Knowledge of the consumer and his or her behavior is of paramount importance for designing any marketing activity like pricing and promotions targeted towards them (Applebaum, 1951). We are of the view that knowledge about consumer behavior can be obtained from :

- i) **Demographics or Composition of the Consumers :** For example, the age, sex, economic and educational status, nationality, religion, and so forth.
- ii) **Origins of the Consumers :** For example, from where does a customer come, what is the geographic distribution of their homes, and how far from home they have to travel to reach a store?
- iii) **Consumer Buying Behavior Patterns :** For example, place of purchase, items purchased, time and frequency of purchase, method of purchase, and response to sales promotion devices.

✚ **Composition of the Rural Consumer :** According to Meserole (1938), the rural - urban terms are in a continuum, and no line of demarcation can be drawn between what is truly urban and what is truly rural. In this conceptual study, the authors observed that mere numerical distinction (as generally proposed in the Census of any country) is of no use to the marketer who is trying to understand the rural market and its consumers. Furthermore, each marketer forms his or her different guidelines to access the rural market. Thus, we are of the view that due to such confusions, the marketers make their sales planning primarily based on 'unknown rural population lives under undefined rural conditions in uncharted rural places'. Hence, an important aspect of rural marketing is to identify the significant demographic variables or barometers to identify the target market and unleash its potential (Rao, 1973). The barometers of rural marketing are occupation, literacy, income, and age.

✚ **Origins of the Consumer :** Marketers should be able to demarcate between a rural consumer and an urban consumer (Jha, 1988). This demarcation is of primary importance as the marketing activities will have to be designed accordingly. Marketers are generally oblivious to the fact that a consumer's origins may be in the rural areas. The rural consumer may purchase a product from the nearest town or city, but his source or origin is in the rural area, and hence, the behavioural pattern will be significantly different from that of an urban dweller.

✚ **Consumer Buying Behaviour Pattern :** To gain significant insight into the rural consumer buying behaviour pattern, the marketers need to know from where the rural consumer makes his purchase - whether it is the village store or the rural consumer bears the hardship of going to the nearest town or city to make his or her purchase. Marketers should also have knowledge about the items that are purchased by the consumers and the frequency of purchase, that is, daily, weekly, and monthly purchases. Furthermore, of significant importance is the method of purchase adopted by a rural consumer- cash or credit (Balakrishnan, 1978 ; McKinsey & Company Report, 2008).

✚ **Role of the Marketer as a Strategic Innovator :** Recent marketing literature following the tradition of the activist school of thought has raised an important issue regarding the concept of rural marketing. According to Modi (2009) and Vaswani et al. (2005), marketers willing to venture in rural markets should be prepared to undertake such marketing activities through which they would be able to raise the standard of living of the rural consumers. Modi (2009) clearly indicated that any rural marketing activity should lead to a positive net developmental impact on the rural consumers. However, such a positive impact of marketing can only arise when the marketer innovates. In their study, Anderson and Markides (2007) observed that marketers like Hindustan Unilever Ltd. (HUL) in India have, in the recent past, acted as strategic innovators and were not only able to cater to customers in far-flung areas using innovations in their marketing activities, but they have also been able to generate a positive net developmental impact (through projects like Project Shakti) on rural consumers and thereby, raising their standard of living.

Researchers across different geographic regions of Africa, South Asia, East, and South-East Asia have identified that strategic innovation in marketing activities could be arrived at by incorporating four key constructs- affordability, accessibility, availability, and awareness. Sakkthivel and Bishnurpiya (2005) were of the view that company goods and services should be affordable in terms of their prices for the consumers at the bottom of the pyramid. Affordability will bring forth even those consumers who are unwilling to spend because of their very low income levels. However, apart from being affordable, the consumers should also have accessibility to those products or services which cater to their specific needs. For example, a micro pack or a sachet of shampoo caters to the needs of the consumers who are at the bottom of the pyramid (Sakkthivel & Bishnurpiya, 2005). Rural dwellers generally have low per capita income as compared to urban dwellers, and hence, pricing (affordability) and packaging (accessibility) of products is of utmost importance. Companies should provide items or products at a low unit price and in smaller sizes.

Combined with the concepts of affordability and accessibility is the issue of availability or the importance of distribution channels. As far as distribution is concerned, Rao (1973) opined that the wider is the range of distribution, the higher are the chances of success. Balakrishnan (1978) viewed sales vans (both company owned or hired), company-owned sales personnel, unconventional transport systems like bullock carts, and appointment of primary dealers as making a significant impact on a product's availability. Companies like Hindustan Unilever Limited, Eveready, and others have developed unique distribution networks to cater to far-flung rural areas in India (Anderson & Markides, 2006), but at the same time, it is necessary to understand whether the consumers are really getting the benefits of innovations that these companies have adopted, or they still have to bear the hardship of going to urban settings to make their purchases. The fourth factor which a strategic innovator should consider is Awareness.

Paninchukunnath (2010) in a recent study observed that the appropriate marketing strategy for the rural consumer is that of pull marketing. Pull marketing primarily aims at communicating with the rural consumers and trying to assess what they want. In this process, products are modified to suit the rural consumers according to their needs and requirements. Again, needs and demands of different segments of the consumers may be different. Marketers, while deciding on the communication strategies in rural markets, should consider the different occupational segments prevalent in a rural market. For example, a landlord will be able to purchase a television set and can be influenced by advertisements on television, while a landless laborer can be influenced by advertisements and promotions on radio. Again, in many rural markets (for example: Kerala), the migration of the rural youth to cities or abroad for education and job implies that knowledge of brands among the rural youths and their families may be high due to the higher exposure of these consumers to different brands and their related communications. This could help promotional campaigns of national or regional brands to make a dent in the rural market. However, communication in the rural market should be more of the personal form rather than mass media. The personal media may consist of opinion leaders, local fairs, haats, and melas. Impersonal media -like newspapers - is limited only to the literates. Balakrishnan (1978) was of the view that advertisements should be "simple and unsophisticated" due to the low creative sophistication and low literacy rates of the rural consumers. Firms, at the same time, should use new forms of media to educate the consumers and make them aware of their products.

↳ **Constraints Faced by the Rural Consumers :** Marketers should also be aware of the different constraints that a rural consumer has to consider while allocating his or her low disposable income towards the purchase of goods or services. The McKinsey & Company Report (2008) on the Indian retail sector claimed that a majority of the Indian consumers made their grocery purchases on credit. However, according to a past study of Balakrishnan (1978), not in all rural market consumers are provided with purchases in credit. In some rural markets, out of consumer's total purchases, 60-70% is on credit, while in some other markets, credit purchase is as low as 15-20%. Apart from credit, another constraint related with the rural consumer purchase behavior is medical facility. Navelker and Banker (1978) observed that lack of medical facilities like availability of doctors, medicines, and hospital beds are a substantial constraint to the rural growth. A major portion of the rural consumer's income is spent towards obtaining these resources. Both the government and the marketers must make this basic facility available to the consumers so that higher disposable income is present with the rural consumer. They were also of the view that constraints like banking facilities (for retailers) and medical facilities (for consumers) should also be considered by the marketers. Thus, the problems and constraints that the marketers face in a rural market can be addressed only when the marketers try to understand these barometers of the rural consumers. For this, a micro analysis of the rural consumer behavior is required (Jha, 1988).

Objectives of the Study

From the review of literature, clearly, knowledge about the consumers and innovations by the firms are the two most important facets of rural marketing. Given this fact, in the present study, we intend to fulfil two basic objectives. The first objective was to gain significant knowledge about the consumer buying behavior in the rural market. The second objective was to explore whether the products/ services offered by the marketers for rural consumers have indeed become affordable, accessible, and available, and whether they (the rural consumers) are aware of different products or services of firms in the rural market.

Data and Methodology

The study being a novel one, there was no prior set of questions to guide us. Moreover, the exploratory nature of the study required more open-ended questions. Lastly, the target audience being less educated, there was no opportunity to use sophisticated questions and scales.

↳ **Questionnaire Design :** The first set of questions was drafted by the authors after a brain storming session keeping into consideration the two studies of Applebaum (1951) and Anderson and Markides (2006). This was then discussed with three experts from practice who helped in refining the initial set of questions. Thus, the final set of questions contained questions on composition and demographics of rural consumers, origins of the consumers, consumer buying

pattern, likely weekly and monthly purchase pattern, and product categories frequently purchased. Additionally, we were also interested to know the media habits of the rural consumers, and the constraints faced by them in allocating their low disposable income towards making purchases. The final questionnaire contained 24 questions.

✎ **Sampling :** We selected the state of West Bengal for data collection as it is among the top three most populous states in terms of rural population in India (Government of India, 2011). West Bengal accounts for around 8% of the total rural population in India. Four different villages having demographic similarities were selected randomly from the district of Bardhaman in West Bengal. The reason behind selecting Bardhaman district was because of it being one of the more affluent districts, with the villagers being involved in more forms of livelihood than farming. The four villages were Haldi, Channa, Mahachanda, and Simdal. The first two villages were in a radius of 15 km, while the last two were in a radius of 30 km from the city of Bardhaman. According to Balakrishnan (1978) and Rao (1973), proximity to a city results in similar liking and preferences, and hence, we considered both types of rural consumers—those living closer to the city and those living in the interiors. A sample of 100 respondents was targeted from each village for the study. The respondents were selected randomly using the occupational pattern list of the four villages which were obtained from the secretaries of the village panchayats to which the chosen villages of our study belong to. Each list consisted of all the adult villagers in a given village that have been identified based on their occupational pattern. The questionnaires were filled up using an interview method. However, due to poor response rate and unwillingness of the respondents to participate in the study, only 244 completely filled questionnaires could be obtained. The study was conducted during the period from January - April 2013.

✎ **Data Analysis :** Descriptive data analysis techniques such as frequencies and percentage shares were used to analyze the data. In one particular case, correspondence analysis was used to identify the relationship (if any) between occupation type and the type of media watched.

✎ **Basic Demographics of the Consumers :** Out of the total number of respondents, 69% were males, and 31% were females. Majority of the respondents (62%) were in the age category of 25 years to less than 45 years of age. There was almost an equal spread of respondents belonging to different occupations. The distribution was as follows—daily wage earners (26%), farm labourers (24%), running their own business (22%), unemployed (15%) and service (13%). Around 65% of the respondents had less than 10 years of formal education, out of which 35% had less than five years of formal education. Interestingly, 26% of the respondents were found to have formal education ranging from 10 years to less than 16 years. The average monthly income of the respondents was around INR 2700. 49% of the respondents had two earning members in their family, whereas 41% had one working member. Regarding the type of dwelling, 74% respondents stayed in mud houses, and the remaining were residing in brick built houses.

Results and Analysis

There were quite a few questions intended to find out the buying pattern of the respondents. Regarding frequency of visit to the market, majority of the respondents (46%) said that they visited the market thrice a week, while 15% of the respondents said they visited the market twice a week. Almost all the respondents (93%) were found to purchase the grocery and necessities from the village store. The weekly purchase basket consisted of three categories - grocery, cooking oil, and vegetables; fuel and grocery ; and grocery and non vegetarian food. Similarly, the monthly purchase basket consisted of four categories - spices, FMCG, fuel, and cereal. Unavailability of medical services was experienced by a majority of the respondents. A reasonably good number of respondents (34%) said that most of the purchase decisions were taken jointly or in consultation with the family, whereas 51% revealed that the decisions were taken alone. There was also a category of respondents (15%) who said that the decisions were dependent upon the products being purchased, and thus, it varied across product categories. In case of most of the products purchased weekly or monthly, a majority of the respondents were found to buy loose/ open products as compared to packaged products. Marketers may accordingly consider providing the rural consumers even those products in packaged or micro packs, the purchases of which are made on a monthly basis. This would result in increasing accessibility of products for the rural consumers.

The respondents also had their view- point on affordability. 36% of the respondents felt all the products were becoming expensive, whereas 23% felt that the necessities were getting costlier than others. Fuel, a necessity for farming, was perceived to have a higher price increase by 20% of the respondents, and 21% felt that the medicines were becoming more expensive.

Regarding the issue of availability, particularly for non-food items, 46% of the respondents said they had to buy clothing followed by products such as cosmetics and shoes (40%) from towns. However, when it came to these types of purchases, only 3% of the respondents replied that they purchased the said products from the village shop. A majority (66%) of the respondents were found to buy clothing from the town shop or from the town hawker. A related question to this was how far were the respondents desirous to travel if all the items were made available at one place. To this question, 51% respondents replied that they were willing to travel between 8-12 km and 39% respondents replied they were willing to travel between 4- 8 km. From our study, we were, however, not able to ascertain whether all the products were available within the village or not. It was only for apparel and cosmetics product categories they (the villagers) usually traveled to cities to make their purchase(s). Regarding the media habit of the villagers, all the respondents agreed that they had exposure to advertisements, and 40% respondents were found to have exposure to more than one type of media. Here, media exposure meant a media which appealed to at least one of the senses. Regarding the type of advertisements viewed, an interesting observation that came out, which was that 27% of the respondents replied that they could recall political advertisements, 16% could recall advertisements of new products, whereas 27% respondents could recall more than one advertisement on television. Coming to the most exposed media, television was found to be watched by 31% of the respondents, 26% respondents listened to the radio, newspapers were read by 12% respondents, and the remaining 31% claimed to have exposure to media such as outdoor word of mouth, haats, and village fairs.

To understand the relationship between occupation type and exposure to media, we ran a correspondence analysis using SPSS Version 20. The total number of occupational categories were 11 and 2 categories - namely housewives and unemployed - were not earning anything. The number of categories were reduced to five based on similarity of occupation to simplify the analysis. The five categories were daily wage earners, businessmen, services, farm labourers, and unemployed people. There were four different types of media to which the audiences were exposed to. These were radio, television, newspaper, and other media forms such as outdoor and word of mouth. Thus, the correspondence analysis was run on the variable occupation (having five categories) and media (having four categories). The correspondence analysis was run using Euclidean distance as the mapping measure on a two-dimensional space with symmetric normalization. The two-dimensional solution as shown in the Table 1 explained a cumulative inertia of .999, thereby ensuring that two-dimensional solutions were sufficient. The row and column points overview in Table 2 and Table 3 also suggested a fairly high contribution of the distance spread being explained by a two-dimensional solution. Thus, the authors decided to stick to the two-dimensional solution for the correspondence analysis.

The correspondence plot as shown in the Figure 1 revealed a clear correspondence between the occupational type and media exposed to. Radio was found to be dominantly listened to by the daily wagers, whereas television was a favorite among the farm labourers. The businessmen were found to be closely related to the “others” category which consisted of media such as - WOM (word of mouth) and outdoor media. Respondents in the services sector were more inclined towards newspapers. For the unemployed category, the size of group being low, there was no clear

Table 1. Dimensions

Dimension	Singular Value	Inertia	Proportion of Inertia		Confidence Singular Value	
			Accounted for	Cumulative	Standard Deviation	Correlation
						2
1	.484	.235	.777	.777	.027	.342
2	.259	.067	.222	.999	.024	
3	.021	.000	.001	1.000		
Total		.302	1.000	1.000		

Source: Primary Data

Table 2. Overview Row Points

Media	Score in Dimension				Contribution				
	Mass			Inertia	Of Point to Inertia of Dimension		Of Dimension to Inertia of Point		
		1	2		1	2	1	2	Total
Radio	.250	-.828	.641	.110	.353	.397	.757	.243	1.000
TV	.250	1.090	.349	.152	.613	.117	.948	.052	1.000
News	.250	-.010	-.413	.011	.000	.164	.001	.977	.978
Others	.250	-.253	-.577	.029	.033	.322	.263	.731	.994
Active Total	1.000			.302	1.000	1.000			

Source: Primary Data

Table 3. Overview Column Points

Occupation	Score in Dimension				Contribution				
	Mass			Inertia	Of Point to Inertia of Dimension		Of Dimension to Inertia of Point		
		1	2		1	2	1	2	Total
Daily wage	.200	-.813	.647	.086	.273	.323	.747	.253	1.000
Business	.200	-.291	-.795	.041	.035	.488	.200	.798	.998
Services	.200	-.289	-.325	.014	.034	.082	.586	.397	.983
Farm Labor	.200	1.255	.121	.153	.650	.011	.995	.005	1.000
Others	.200	.138	.353	.008	.008	.096	.221	.769	.990
Active Total	1.000			.302	1.000	1.000			

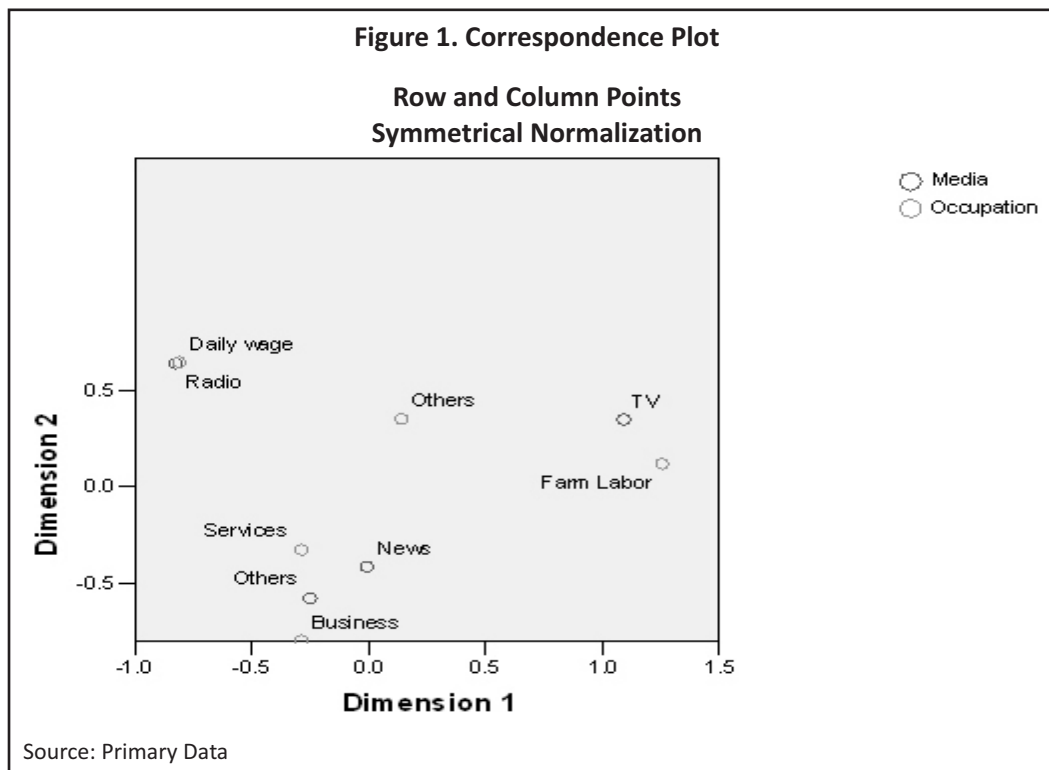
Source: Primary Data

correspondence to any of the media categories. The detailed analysis of media exposure and occupational type reveals that marketers in the rural area could use different media vehicles to make consumers aware of the type of product or services being launched by them. For example, a fertilizer firm should use the television as a medium to make the farm labourers familiar about their products.

One question was inspired by the Mckinsey & Company Report (2008) on Indian retailing, which found that grocery sales take place on credit in the unorganized retail sector. Our study, however, threw up a contradicting results. Majority of the respondents (69%) revealed that the village shop did not sell products on credit, whereas only 31% respondents said that they purchased products on credit. As regards to the affordability of products in rural markets, much depends upon the accessibility of credit purchases. From our study, it is evident that purchasing products at credit is not easily available to the consumers. They generally have to forgo a lot of their purchases owing to low disposable income. Thus, here affordability is indirectly linked to the availability of credit from the village shops. If the consumers got products on credit, the question of affordability does not arise for the consumers.

Discussion and Suggestions

From our study, one important aspect of the rural market that emerged was that occupational categories are not only limited to farmers and farm labourers, but also to other categories such as business, services, and daily wage earners. The increase in literacy level and growth throughout the economy in the post liberalization period has trickled down to the rural economy as well. There is a marked shift in occupational pattern as is evident from our study. Employment beyond the agricultural sector, which still accounts for 60% of the rural workforce of the GDP (Government of India, Census 2001), is on a rise. Employment in the unorganized and organized sectors both are on the rise. Secondly, the correspondence analysis revealed a clear relationship between occupation and media habits. The farm labourers were more inclined towards television, while daily wage earners were more inclined towards radio. In the present study, daily wage earners represent that category of people who were either assisting the shopkeepers or were rickshaw



pullers or vendors or the ones who went to the city in the morning to sell their labour for odd jobs like cleaning of a house, watering the garden, and so forth, or were skilled workers like masons, gardeners, and so forth. This category of occupation involves labour throughout the day and returning to the village only at night. Furthermore, it was found that majority of the respondents (72%) who fell under the daily wage earner category listened to advertisements rather than watching the same. Usually, the daily wage earners carry their radio along with them. For example, a rickshaw-puller attaches the radio to the front basket of the rickshaw and listens to it whenever he feels so. As for the farm laborers, their inclination is more towards television, mainly on the ground that they require information on weather conditions prevailing in the district and to keep track of the new technology and methods adopted in farming. Additionally, the morning news on the current rates of different vegetables and cash crops in the market are closely observed. However, most of the viewing is done early in the morning or late at night. The advertisements in these types of programs are generally related to agricultural products and related accessories. Such programs are telecasted in the regional language by both local and state wide service providers. In the case of the farm labourers, not all own a piece of land, so they may work in farms throughout the day and at night, view television in village clubs along with the other community members. Scope of advertisements is quite limited for those engaged directly in farming as their interest is also in specific programs which cater to their agricultural needs. On the other hand, for daily wage earners who listened to the radio and for those labourers who worked on farms and watched television, advertisements can play a significant role as they (the respondents) listened to or viewed a wide variety of programs. Advertisements in both the mediums will be able to cater to the information needs of the daily wage earners.

Those respondents belonging to the categories of business and services were more inclined towards newspapers and other forms of media like pamphlets, theatres, and so forth. This is mainly on the ground that a majority of the respondents (68%) belonging to both these categories were literate and had more than 10 years of formal education. While the respondents in the category of business consisted of businessmen and shopkeepers, the respondents in the category of services consisted of school teachers, private-sector employees, or respondents employed in government or in other services. They were more prone to reading newspapers as the newspapers provide a descriptive view about different topics of interest. Secondly, respondents of these two categories generally traveled to the nearest town or city for business deals or daily work and read a newspaper while going to work or while coming back. Due to the interest of the respondents in this category in newspapers and other forms of information like pamphlets, which mostly come

along with newspapers, companies should give their advertisements in these newspapers with adequate description of the products or services offered by them. Furthermore, information on discounts and coupons which are offered by specific stores or company outlets in most of the towns and cities can easily reach both servicemen and businessmen from rural areas due to their reading habit and frequent travel to the city. Thirdly, the weekly and monthly purchase patterns are an important source of information of the rural consumers' buying pattern. Expensive items like fuel and cooking oil were a major constituent of the weekly shopping basket of the consumers owing to their extensive use in farming and fisheries. Moreover, in our study, FMCG products figured only in the monthly consumption basket, while the same were totally absent from the weekly consumption basket. Interestingly, FMCG products like shampoos, soaps, and so forth are available in sachets and should have been present in the weekly consumption basket of the respondents. However, this was not the case. This can be partly attributed to the habits of the rural consumers. Maybe, the FMCG products are not used daily, but may be used on important occasions or once or twice a month. Cooking oil, fuel, groceries, and vegetables formed the major constituents of the weekly purchase basket. The monthly purchase basket constituted mostly of FMCGs and spices. As regards to spices, another question that we posed to the respondents was whether spices were purchased in packed or in unpacked (loose) form. To this question, most of the respondents replied that they preferred the loose or unpacked spices as spices are costly items and are purchased as per requirement. If this is the case, then spices should have figured in the weekly purchase basket, but paradoxically, spices figured in the monthly purchase basket only. This again is a contradiction to the generally held belief. If the consumers purchased unpacked spices, their consumption rate should be faster as spices are perishable commodities. Again, purchase of spices on a monthly basis indicates that consumption of spices happened only on specific days of a month. Companies selling FMCG products and spices should take care of these paradoxes and try to increase the usage of the products.

The availability of products and services like medical facilities (including both medicines and doctors) and transportation services are a major concern for the rural respondents. As such, the availability of these products should increase. This is mainly on the ground that rural consumers spend a large amount of their resources on medical facilities, which reduces the disposable income of the consumers. Availability of medical services for the villages at a lesser cost will result in higher disposable income with the rural consumer, and higher expenditure towards food and non-food items. Availability of transport facilities is again a major issue with the rural consumers. Improved infrastructure and transport facilities will result in increased access to the town market for the consumers and increased access to the village market for the retailers.

Finally, from our study, we have come to a conclusion that a small rural mall or a market place which could act as a hub for the surrounding villages could be thought of. This is necessary if the problems related to availability and affordability have to be addressed. Although, weekly haats and seasonal and religious melas do take place, but the presence of a regular market place within an accessible distance will be able to solve much of the problems related to the availability of the products. It is suggested that the proposed mall or marketplace should be located at a maximum distance of 12 km from the villages from where the rural consumers could obtain almost all the required products. The mall may be small, but should have an assortment of products within it so that both the weekly and monthly purchase requirements of the respondents could be satisfied. A small pharmacy outlet should also be available in the mall from where the consumers should be able to obtain both over the counter OTC and prescribed drugs. Another important feature of the market place should be to provide consumers with credit facility within a specified limit. The survey revealed that clearly, the village shopkeepers did not provide credit facility to the shoppers, and this actually acted as a hindrance towards the village consumers making FMCG purchases. If a rural consumer has to purchase everything in cash, then for him, the best option would be to purchase items of daily use and of utmost necessity first. Subsequently, if some cash is left as surplus, then only FMCG purchases will be made. Thus, to make FMCG purchases affordable, it is necessary that some provision should be made for the rural consumers so that they can make such purchases on credit.

Conclusion

The present study aimed at providing a thorough account of the constituents of the rural consumers' purchase behavior and also provided some information about their consumption basket. The important issues that we have observed in the present study are related to affordability, accessibility, availability, and awareness of products among the rural consumers. Anderson and Markides's (2006) framework can serve as an important guideline for a marketer venturing

into the rural market. Besides, we have also highlighted certain constraints like medical and transport facilities, which prevail in the rural market. Certain myths regarding purchases on credit and consumption of spices and FMCG products have also been discussed. None of these figured in a significant manner in the weekly purchase basket, though both spices and cooking oil are purchased in open or unpacked form. The marketers must identify the reasons for such a purchasing pattern. Again, inflation or affordability is a significant contributor towards decreasing the disposable income of the rural consumer. Merely providing the consumer with smaller packs with less unit price would not suffice. A holistic view of this situation is required as the per capita income of the rural folks is much lower. Though the present study was limited to using open-ended questions, but the ultimate objective of the present study - to obtain a detailed account of the rural consumers' buying behavior - was definitely fulfilled.

Managerial Implications

The present study brings out several factors that a rural marketing manager has to keep in mind before starting operations in a rural market. These factors range from economic factors to social and environmental factors. The first and foremost point which the manager has to keep in mind is the economic structure of the rural population, which in the present study was a mix of mainly labor intensive occupations. Thus, the earning pattern of the rural audience is more of daily wages rather than a fixed salary. Thus, the marketer has to think of special promotional schemes quite unlike the urban areas to tap the rural audience. For example, since fuel and cooking oil were found to contribute a majority to the purchase basket and FMCGs are also items of high consumption, a product bundling strategy could be tried out by the marketers, where the price of the bundle would be lesser than the price of buying the products separately. Since many oil companies have tried their hand in rural retailing, the viability of the same could be explored. Absence of rural credit facilities is also a challenge which a marketer can try to counter. Given that the shopkeepers are not willing to give credit, the marketers could think of a buyback scheme which would guarantee a supply of raw materials to the marketer and would provide the rural buyer with products instead. Similar schemes have been tried out successfully in certain parts of India by companies such as ITC. This would also lead to the development of the economy as a whole and would support existing views on the developmental role of rural marketing (Modi, 2009 ; Vaswani et al., 2005). However, these schemes would be applicable only to the farmers and not to the wage labourers.

The social factors are related with the media habits of the consumers. Television emerged as the most watched media and this indicates a shift from radio being the most popular media in the rural households. This also points out the rise in affordability of the rural consumers. However, before the rural marketer embarks on TVCs for rural consumers, he/she should focus on the low recall rates of TV ads among the rural respondents. This may be the result of two factors: **(a)** the ad clutter which is a common feature in present day TV channels, and **(b)** the level of understanding of the rural audience, which may prevent them from understanding the message in complex/abstract ads. Thus, it would be wiser for the rural marketer to opt for different sets of ads for the rural and the urban audience. Moreover, the marketers could also try to utilize the potential of more engaging rural media such as haats and melas, where a two-way interaction could be possible.

Lastly, the environmental factors are to do more with the infrastructural drawbacks in the rural markets. It was evident from the results that the consumers had to travel a considerable distance to procure a majority of their shopping goods. The challenge for the marketers here is distribution. This could be addressed by unique distribution strategies such as customized vans, which could hop from one village to another and stop at pre-designated time slots at each place. In such cases, the vans could act as shopping outlets and communication hubs at the same time. Big FMCG companies are trying out this tactic, but only on a small scale because of the costs involved. This could also be a potential option for pharmaceutical companies, since they could provide the right medicines at discounted prices. Likewise, the rural marketing managers have to devise customized strategies to suit the rural needs keeping in mind the costs and the marketing objectives.

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