



A Comparative Study of Urban and Rural Entrepreneurship in India: Issues, Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract:

Entrepreneurship in India differs sharply between urban and rural areas. Urban regions benefit from better infrastructure, finance, and market access, while rural areas rely more on micro enterprises, self-employment, and informal activities. Using secondary data from MSME, PLFS, NITI Aayog, and digital adoption surveys, this paper compares enterprise distribution, self-employment patterns, gender aspects, and digital usage across both regions. The findings show that MSMEs are nearly equally spread between urban and rural India, though urban units are larger and more capital intensive. Rural areas have higher self-employment and slightly higher women-owned enterprises, but most remain small and credit-constrained. Digital tools are rapidly spreading in rural and semi-urban enterprises, helping reduce the rural–urban gap. Key challenges include infrastructure shortages, limited credit, skill gaps, gender barriers in rural areas, and high competition and regulatory complexity in urban areas. The study highlights the need for targeted policies, digital and financial inclusion, cluster development, and stronger support systems to promote balanced entrepreneurial growth.

Keywords: *Urban Entrepreneurship, Rural Entrepreneurship, MSMEs, Self-Employment, Digitalization, Gender, India, Economic Development.*

Introduction:

Entrepreneurship plays an important role in creating jobs, driving innovation, promoting regional development, and reducing poverty in India. The country has over 6.3 crore Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), which contribute nearly 30% to GDP and about 44% of exports. This makes them crucial to India's growth story. (microsave.net)

However, entrepreneurship in India is not the same everywhere; it is influenced by a clear urban-rural divide. Urban

entrepreneurs work in environments with better access to infrastructure, finance, skilled labour, business services, and market networks. In contrast, rural entrepreneurs often face resource limitations and rely on informal networks, agriculture-related activities, and micro or home-based businesses.

At the same time, rural India has a large number of self-employed workers. This shows both an entrepreneurial spirit and a lack of enough wage employment opportunities. (Rural India Online) Recent

initiatives like Start-up India, Digital India, Make in India, and Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana–NRLM aim to boost entrepreneurship across regions, but significant differences still exist.

This paper conducts a comparative study of urban and rural entrepreneurship in India. It focuses on the issues, challenges, and emerging opportunities in both areas.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To compare the distribution and characteristics of urban and rural enterprises in India.
2. To examine patterns of self-employment and enterprise ownership across urban and rural areas.

3. To analyze gender dimensions in urban and rural entrepreneurship.
4. To assess the role of digitalization in transforming entrepreneurship in rural and urban India.
5. To identify key challenges and future opportunities for bridging the urban–rural entrepreneurship divide.

Research Methodology:

The study is **descriptive and analytical** in nature and is based entirely on **secondary data**. All collected data are organised into simple quantitative tables for comparison, and each table is followed by a brief interpretation.

Quantitative Profile of Urban and Rural Entrepreneurship in India:

1. Distribution of MSMEs: Rural vs Urban:

Table 1: Distribution of MSMEs by Location (All India)

| Indicator | Value (Lakh MSMEs) | Percentage Share (%) |
|-----------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| Total estimated MSMEs | 633.88 | 100 |
| MSMEs in rural areas | 324.88 | 51.25 |
| MSMEs in urban areas | 309 | 48.75 |

Source: Ministry of MSME, *Annual Report 2023–24*, based on NSS 73rd round estimates.
([MSME](#))

Table 1 shows that MSMEs are almost evenly distributed between rural and urban India, with a **slight majority (51.25%) located in rural areas**. This indicates that entrepreneurship is not confined to cities; in fact, rural areas host a substantial entrepreneurial base, especially micro and household enterprises. Urban enterprises, however, are more likely to be engaged in manufacturing and services with

higher value addition, while many rural enterprises are small-scale, informal and often home-based.

2. Self-Employment Patterns: Rural vs Urban:

Entrepreneurship is closely linked to self-employment. PLFS data provide a useful indication of the share of workers who are self-employed versus salaried.

Table 2: Percentage of Workers Who Are Self-Employed and Salaried by Area and Gender (2023–24)

| Area | Gender | Self-employed (%) | Regular wage/salaried (%) |
|-------|--------|-------------------|---------------------------|
| Rural | Male | 59.4 | 15.8 |
| Rural | Female | 73.5 | 7.8 |
| Urban | Male | 39.8 | 46.8 |
| Urban | Female | 42.3 | 49.4 |

Source: PLFS Annual Report, July 2023–June 2024, usual principal and subsidiary status.

([Rural India Online](#))

Table 2 highlights the **structural contrast** between rural and urban labour markets. In rural India, a **much higher proportion of workers are self-employed**, especially women (73.5%). This reflects both family farming and non-farm micro enterprises, but also the absence of formal wage employment opportunities. In urban areas, regular wage/salaried employment dominates, particularly for women, indicating better access to organised-sector jobs but also possibly **lower necessity-**

driven self-employment. The data suggest that rural entrepreneurship is often survival-oriented and informal, whereas urban entrepreneurship may be more opportunity-driven and integrated with formal markets.

3. Gender and Entrepreneurship: Women-owned Enterprises:

Women's entrepreneurship is crucial for inclusive growth. Data on women-owned MSMEs reveal interesting rural–urban patterns.

Table 3: Share of Women-Owned MSMEs in Rural and Urban Areas

| Category | Share of women-owned enterprises (%) |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| Women-owned MSMEs – rural enterprises (overall) | 22.24 |
| Women-owned MSMEs – urban enterprises (overall) | 18.42 |

Source: M/o MSME estimates summarized in reports on women entrepreneurship and NITI Aayog study on women-owned MSMEs. ([GIZ](#))

Table 3 shows that women-owned enterprises form a **higher share of total enterprises in rural areas (22.24%)** compared to urban areas (18.42%). This suggests that rural women are significantly engaged in entrepreneurship, often through micro and home-based ventures in sectors such as food processing, tailoring, handicrafts, livestock, and small retail. However, most of these enterprises are **small-scale, low-capital and vulnerable**,

with limited access to markets and formal finance. In urban India, although women's share is slightly lower, women entrepreneurs are more likely to be in services, education, health, retail and professional activities with relatively higher value addition.

4. Digital Adoption among Rural and Semi-Urban Enterprises:

Digitalization is altering the entrepreneurial landscape by lowering

transaction costs and improving market access.

Table 4: Selected Indicators of Digital Adoption among Rural/Semi-Urban Enterprises

| Indicator | Value / Finding |
|--|-----------------------|
| MSMEs in semi-urban and rural India reporting business growth via digital tools (smartphones, UPI, etc.) | 73% of MSMEs surveyed |
| Rural & semi-urban respondents preferring UPI as primary transaction mode | 38% of users |

Source: MSME Digital Index Report (PayNearby) and EY–CII survey on rural/semi-urban digital finance. ([The Economic Times](#))

Table 4 indicates that **digital tools are increasingly penetrating rural and semi-urban entrepreneurship**. Nearly three-fourths of MSMEs covered in a recent survey reported business growth after adopting smartphones and UPI-based digital payments. ([The Economic Times](#)) Around 38% of respondents in rural and semi-urban India now prefer UPI as their main payment mode, reflecting growing comfort with digital transactions. ([EY](#)) This narrowing of the digital divide is an important opportunity for rural entrepreneurs to connect with suppliers, customers and financial services in ways that were previously difficult.

Issues and Challenges in Urban and Rural Entrepreneurship:

1. Rural Entrepreneurship: Key Issues:

- Infrastructure Gaps:** Rural entrepreneurs suffer from poor road connectivity, unreliable electricity, limited storage facilities and weaker logistics, raising costs and limiting market reach.
- Access to Formal Finance:** Despite schemes like MUDRA and PM SVANidhi, many rural entrepreneurs still depend on informal lenders due to lack of collateral, limited banking

outreach or cumbersome procedures. Women and first-generation entrepreneurs are particularly disadvantaged.

- Skill and Information Gaps:** Technical, managerial and digital skills are often limited. Awareness of government schemes, market trends, quality standards and e-commerce platforms is low.
- Market Linkage Constraints:** Rural enterprises face difficulty accessing urban or export markets, depend on middlemen, and struggle with branding, packaging and meeting bulk orders.
- Gender Barriers:** Social norms, mobility restrictions and unequal unpaid care responsibilities restrict the scale and scope of women's businesses, even though women account for a substantial share of rural enterprises. ([GIZ](#))
- Over-reliance on Agriculture and Seasonal Income:** Many non-farm enterprises are indirectly dependent on agricultural incomes, making them vulnerable to monsoon and price shocks.

2. Urban Entrepreneurship: Key Issues:

1. **High Entry and Operating Costs:** Urban entrepreneurs face high rentals, wages, compliance and utility costs, which raise the threshold scale needed for survival.
2. **Regulatory Complexity and Compliance Burden:** Despite improvements in the ease of doing business, multiple registrations, licences, environmental clearances and tax compliances can still be burdensome, especially for small entrepreneurs.
3. **Intense Competition:** Urban markets are more competitive, with large firms, established brands and organized retail often crowding out small players.
4. **Informality and Precarity:** Many urban enterprises operate informally, without registration or social security coverage for workers, making them vulnerable to shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic.
5. **Digital Divide Within Cities:** While many urban firms are digitally advanced, a large section of informal urban enterprises still lack the skills and infrastructure to fully leverage digital tools.

Comparative Analysis: Urban vs Rural Entrepreneurship:

1. **Scale and Capital Intensity:** Urban enterprises are generally larger, more capital intensive, and better integrated into formal value chains. Rural enterprises tend to be micro, family-run and based on limited capital.

2. **Motivation – Opportunity vs Necessity:** Urban entrepreneurship is more likely to be **opportunity-driven** (identifying new markets, innovation, lifestyle businesses), while rural entrepreneurship is often **necessity-driven**, reflecting limited wage employment options.
3. **Sectoral Composition:**
 - **Rural:** agriculture-linked activities, agro-processing, handicrafts, small retail, basic services.
 - **Urban:** diversified services (IT, finance, hospitality, education), manufacturing, advanced trade and logistics.
4. **Labour Market Linkages:** PLFS data indicates that rural areas have a much higher share of self-employed workers, while urban areas have a higher proportion of regular wage employees. ([Rural India Online](#)) This shapes both the volume and nature of entrepreneurial ventures.
5. **Gender Dynamics:** Rural India has a higher proportion of women-owned enterprises, but these are often home-based and low-income. Urban women entrepreneurs may have better access to markets and networks but face intense competition and work–family balance challenges. ([GIZ](#))
6. **Digital and Financial Inclusion:** Though urban areas started ahead in digitalization, recent data suggest rapid uptake of UPI and digital tools in rural and semi-urban MSMEs, reducing some of the historical gap. ([The Economic Times](#))

Opportunities for Bridging the Urban–Rural Entrepreneurship Divide:

Despite challenges, several promising opportunities exist:

1. Digital Platforms and E-commerce:

Expanding internet coverage, smartphones, and UPI provides rural entrepreneurs easier access to markets, customers, training and financial services. Digital marketplaces for farm produce, handicrafts, and rural services can connect rural producers directly with urban consumers.

2. Cluster-Based Development and Value Chains:

Developing rural industrial clusters (e.g., textile clusters, food processing hubs, crafts villages) linked to urban markets can help achieve economies of scale, common branding and shared infrastructure. Urban–rural value chains in milk, vegetables, processed foods, and tourism offer scope for joint entrepreneurship.

3. Skill Development and Entrepreneurship Training:

Targeted skill development programs under **Skill India**, NRLM, DAY–NULM and state-level initiatives can improve managerial, technical and digital skills among youth and women in both rural and urban areas, encouraging more opportunity-driven entrepreneurship.

4. Financial Innovation and Inclusive Credit:

Fintech, digital lending platforms, credit scoring using transaction data and government-backed credit guarantee schemes can improve access to collateral-free loans for both rural and urban micro entrepreneurs, especially women.

5. Social and Green Entrepreneurship:

There is growing scope for enterprises that address social and environmental issues—such as waste management, renewable energy, climate-resilient agriculture, water

management, and rural health—bridging the urban–rural divide through innovative service models.

6. Return Migration and Rural Start-ups:

Post-pandemic reverse migration has pushed many youth back to villages. With proper support, they can become rural entrepreneurs by leveraging urban experience and networks to introduce new products, services or digital platforms in rural markets.

Policy Suggestions:

Based on the comparative analysis, following measures can help strengthen and balance urban and rural entrepreneurship:

1. Strengthen Rural Infrastructure:

Invest in rural roads, cold chains, storage, industrial sheds, reliable power and broadband connectivity to reduce transaction costs for rural enterprises.

2. Simplify Compliance for Micro Enterprises:

Introduce truly single-window digital platforms for registrations and renewals, with simplified procedures and handholding support for both urban and rural small entrepreneurs.

3. Enhance Credit Flow to Rural and Women Entrepreneurs:

Expand credit guarantee schemes, SHG–bank linkages, and targeted refinance for women-led and rural enterprises; incentivise banks and NBFCs to deepen outreach.

4. Promote Entrepreneurship Education and Mentoring:

Integrate entrepreneurship modules into school and college curricula; establish district-level incubation centres with

mentoring, market linkages and digital training.

5. **Leverage Digital Tools Systematically:** Support adoption of digital bookkeeping, GST filing, marketing, and customer management tools, especially for rural and informal enterprises, using vernacular interfaces.
6. **Encourage Urban–Rural Partnerships:** Promote partnerships where urban firms outsource services, components or back-office functions to rural enterprises, creating symbiotic value chains.
7. **Gender-Sensitive Interventions:** Provide safe workspaces, creche facilities, mobility support, and women-focused incubation programs to address gender-specific constraints across both urban and rural entrepreneurship.

Conclusion:

Entrepreneurship in India spans a wide spectrum—from high-tech urban startups to small rural household units. Data on MSME distribution, self-employment patterns, women-owned enterprises and digital adoption show that **rural India is as entrepreneurial as urban India in numerical terms**, though enterprises differ in scale, sector and opportunity structure.

Urban entrepreneurship benefits from better infrastructure, finance and markets but faces intense competition and high costs. Rural entrepreneurship, while numerically strong, is often constrained by infrastructure gaps, informality, limited access to capital and gender barriers. At the same time, the rapid spread of digital tools

and supportive policy frameworks are opening up new possibilities to bridge this divide.

A balanced and inclusive entrepreneurial development strategy must therefore:

- Recognise the **latent entrepreneurial base in rural India**,
- Reduce structural disadvantages through infrastructure, finance and skills, and
- Foster **urban–rural linkages** via value chains and digital platforms.

If these measures are pursued with consistency and sensitivity to local contexts, entrepreneurship can become a powerful instrument of **inclusive and regionally balanced economic development** in India.

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