

ENHANCING RURAL DIGITAL ENTREPRENEURIAL COMPETENCIES FOR IMPROVED PERFORMANCE IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

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by

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DEPARTMENT OF MANAGEMENT STUDIES

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Dedication

To all the brilliantly beautiful and beautifully brilliant souls who
held me who stood by me in my journey

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled “**Enhancing Rural Digital Entrepreneurial Competencies for Improved Performance in the Indian Context**,” submitted by **Gayatri Dwivedi** to the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi for the award of the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy** in the Department of Management Studies, is a record of bona fide and original research work carried out by the candidate. She conducted this work under our supervision and guidance, and (fulfilled all the requirements for the submission of this thesis. To the best of our knowledge, the thesis meets the requisite academic standards in terms of quality, rigor, and contribution. The contents of this thesis, including the models and research findings, have not been submitted to any other institute or university for the award of any degree or diploma.

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Abstract

This study explores the complex and layered intersection of digital technology, entrepreneurship, and rural ecosystems through a competency-focused lens. At its heart lies a fundamental question: how can entrepreneurship in rural settings—often marked by resource constraints, infrastructural gaps, and limited exposure—be revitalized and made future-ready through the integration of context-relevant competencies and digital technologies? Taking rural India as its focal context, the research attempts to address this by identifying and enhancing entrepreneurial competencies that are most relevant to digitally infused rural ecosystems.

Rural regions, despite being repositories of local knowledge, cultural capital, and untapped entrepreneurial energy, have long remained under-leveraged. Constrained by distance from markets, patchy infrastructure, institutional voids, and limited access to networks or formal training, rural entrepreneurs often operate in isolation. Yet, paradoxically, the proliferation of digital connectivity in recent years—driven by smartphones, mobile networks, and government initiatives—has opened up new possibilities that can shift this narrative. Rural digital entrepreneurship, therefore, becomes not just an opportunity but a necessity for inclusive development.

This study adopts a competency-driven approach, positing that equipping rural entrepreneurs with the right set of digital and contextual skills can empower them to navigate uncertainty, leverage new tools, and create value in more agile, sustainable ways. The research rests on a triadic framework: (i) the evolving nature of entrepreneurial practice, (ii) digital affordances and their transformative potential, and (iii) the specificity and embeddedness of rural context. Within this

framework, the study recognizes that while many entrepreneurial competencies may be universally relevant, rural ecosystems demand additional layers of sensitivity—particularly to context, adaptability, and community-based collaboration.

A significant contribution of the study is its emphasis on **contextuality** as an entrepreneurial competence. This includes not only the ability to read the landscape—social, economic, and spatial—but also to adapt strategies that harmonize with local dynamics and challenges. Rural entrepreneurship requires navigating unique social constructs, limited institutional support, and strong relational networks. Thus, competencies such as networking, embeddedness, trust-building, and the ability to align digital affordances with local knowledge emerge as central. Digital technology in this context is not an isolated tool but an enabler—offering enhanced access, connectivity, market linkages, and efficiency, while also demanding a re-skilling and re-thinking of traditional entrepreneurial roles.

Methodologically, the research follows a mixed-method approach, starting with a systematic review of global literature on entrepreneurship, rural enterprise, and digitalisation. Drawing upon both academic frameworks and empirically established reports from global bodies such as the OECD and World Economic Forum, the study identifies a list of entrepreneurial digital competencies aligned with the rural Indian context. These are then validated through expert interviews and structured into a conceptual framework. Statistical tools such as Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), Total Interpretive Structural Modelling (TISM), Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), and PLS-SEM are employed to empirically validate the framework, test interrelationships, and assess impact. The final layer

includes semi-structured interviews with entrepreneurs, trainers, and ecosystem stakeholders—adding practical richness and triangulated insights to the findings.

The results point toward a striking overlap between traditional entrepreneurial competencies and 21st-century skills. However, rural entrepreneurship puts a pronounced emphasis on adaptability, resilience, digital awareness, and the ability to operate across distributed and often fragmented systems. The study finds that building these competencies—through targeted interventions and ecosystem-level support—can significantly impact entrepreneurial confidence, business performance, and long-term sustainability. These enhancements are not merely technical but deeply human, reflecting shifts in mindset, openness to learning, and the ability to handhold others in the entrepreneurial journey.

Furthermore, the findings underscore that rural ecosystems, often seen as “liability-laden,” actually possess immense latent potential. With the right blend of local insight and digital empowerment, these regions can be transformed into hubs of innovation, inclusion, and economic vitality. Rural entrepreneurship, when reinforced through context-specific competencies and digital tools, can feed into national development goals and global sustainability agendas, especially those outlined in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

This research contributes not only to theory-building in the relatively underexplored area of rural digital entrepreneurship but also offers a practical roadmap for policy, training, and support systems. It repositions rural entrepreneurs not as passive recipients of aid or training, but as dynamic actors capable of shaping their environments—provided they are equipped with the competencies that match both the promise and the complexities of their conte

सारांश

यह शोध ग्रामीण डिजिटल उद्यमिता को एक दक्षता-आधारित दृष्टिकोण से समझने का प्रयास करता है, जिसमें डिजिटल प्रौद्योगिकी, उद्यमशीलता और ग्रामीण पारिस्थितिक तंत्र—ये तीन प्रमुख आधार स्तंभ के रूप में कार्य करते हैं। इन तत्वों के परस्पर संबंधों को केंद्र में रखते हुए अध्ययन का उद्देश्य यह जानना है कि किस प्रकार आधुनिक डिजिटल उपकरणों और सूचना-संचार तकनीकों की सहायता से ग्रामीण उद्यमिता को अधिक प्रभावी, समावेशी और सतत बनाया जा सकता है। इस संदर्भ में, यह शोध न केवल तकनीकी दक्षताओं की चर्चा करता है, बल्कि इस बात की भी पड़ताल करता है कि ग्रामीण उद्यमिता को उस विशेष सामाजिक, भौगोलिक और संसाधन-संकीर्ण परिप्रेक्ष्य में किस प्रकार पुनर्परिभाषित और पुनर्गठित किया जा सकता है।

इस शोध की प्रेरणा भारत सहित विश्व के उन विशाल ग्रामीण क्षेत्रों की यथार्थ स्थितियों से प्राप्त हुई है, जो आज भी संरचनात्मक बाधाओं, सीमित संसाधनों, बाजारों से दूरी और अपर्याप्त अवसरों से ग्रस्त हैं। इन चुनौतियों के बावजूद, डिजिटल प्रौद्योगिकियों और इंटरनेट की गहराती पहुँच ने इन क्षेत्रों में नवाचार, जानकारी, नेटवर्किंग और बाजारों तक पहुँच को नए आयाम दिए हैं। ग्रामीण क्षेत्रों की इसी संभावनाशीलता को केन्द्र में रखते हुए, यह शोध विशिष्ट डिजिटल उद्यमी दक्षताओं की पहचान करता है, जो इन संदर्भों में प्रभावी रूप से काम कर सकें।

शोध की शुरुआत एक सैद्धांतिक ढांचे के निर्माण से होती है जिसमें डिजिटल तकनीकों से उपजने वाले अवसरों (digital affordances), ग्रामीण संदर्भ की विशिष्टताएँ, और उद्यमशीलता के व्यवहार को सम्मिलित किया गया है। इसके बाद शोध क्रमिक अनुभवजन्य चरणों से होकर गुज़रता है—जिसमें क्षेत्रीय उद्यमियों, प्रशिक्षकों, परियोजना

प्रमुखों और नीति-निर्माताओं से साक्षात्कार शामिल हैं—ताकि यह समझा जा सके कि इन दक्षताओं की व्यावहारिक प्रासंगिकता और प्रभाव क्या है।

साहित्य समीक्षा, संरचनात्मक मॉडलिंग, कारक विश्लेषण, तथा विशेषज्ञों से साक्षात्कार के माध्यम से यह शोध एक त्रि-आयामी रूप लेता है—सैद्धांतिक विवेचन, अनुभवजन्य परीक्षण, और व्यावहारिक मूल्यांकन। यह स्पष्ट करता है कि ग्रामीण उद्यमियों को केवल तकनीकी उपकरणों की जानकारी नहीं, बल्कि सन्दर्भ-विशेष की समझ, अनुकूलन क्षमता, डिजिटलीकरण के प्रति सकारात्मक दृष्टिकोण और सामाजिक-सांस्कृतिक संवेदनशीलता जैसी क्षमताओं की भी आवश्यकता है।

शोध में यह भी पाया गया कि डिजिटल उद्यमिता केवल प्रौद्योगिकी का प्रयोग नहीं है, बल्कि यह एक समग्र दृष्टिकोण है, जो मूल्य-निर्माण, सामाजिक-सांस्कृतिक अनुकूलन, नेटवर्किंग, और व्यवसायिक रणनीति को एक साथ पिरोता है। जिन उद्यमियों में डिजिटल जागरूकता, सामुदायिक संपर्क, जोखिम प्रबंधन, और नवाचार की समझ होती है, वे न केवल लाभकारी उद्यम स्थापित कर सकते हैं, बल्कि स्थानीय स्तर पर रोजगार, ज्ञान-प्रसार और सामुदायिक विकास में भी योगदान दे सकते हैं।

इस प्रकार यह शोध ग्रामीण भारत में डिजिटल उद्यमिता की संभावनाओं का केवल मूल्यांकन ही नहीं करता, बल्कि वह एक व्यावहारिक मार्गदर्शिका भी प्रस्तुत करता है, जिसे अन्य विकासशील और संसाधन-संकीर्ण क्षेत्रों में भी अपनाया जा सकता है। अंततः यह अध्ययन यह सिद्ध करता है कि यदि उपयुक्त उद्यमी डिजिटल दक्षताओं की पहचान, प्रशिक्षण और क्रियान्वयन की रणनीतियाँ अपनाई जाएँ, तो ग्रामीण पारिस्थितिकी तंत्र को नवाचार और विकास के केंद्रों में रूपांतरित किया जा सकता है।

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