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RESEARCH ARTICLE

ROLE OF INSTITUTIONAL ADMINISTRATION IN STRENGTHENING RURAL HIGHER EDUCATION IN MAHARASHTRA

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ABSTRACT

Higher education in rural regions plays a vital role in promoting inclusive development, particularly through colleges offering traditional streams such as Arts, Commerce, and Science in Maharashtra. This study examines the administrative challenges and opportunities faced by these institutions, with special reference to the impact of the COVID-19 and the implementation of the National Education Policy 2020. The findings reveal that challenges such as lack of resources, financial constraints, and shortage of qualified teachers continue to persist. The pandemic has further intensified issues related to digital infrastructure, resulting in a widened digital divide, decline in student attendance, and learning loss. Comparative analysis shows a shift from structural challenges before COVID-19 to a combination of structural and technology-driven challenges in the post-pandemic period. The study concludes that effective institutional administration and targeted policy support are essential for strengthening rural higher education.

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education is a key driver of socio-economic development, particularly in a large and diverse state like Maharashtra. Colleges offering traditional streams such as Arts, Commerce, and Science constitute the foundation of undergraduate education and continue to play a vital role in promoting access, equity, and inclusiveness. These institutions are especially significant in rural regions, where opportunities for professional and technical education are comparatively limited. As emphasized in the present study, institutional administration plays a crucial role in ensuring the effective functioning and development of these colleges. According to the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) (2020–21), Maharashtra has over 3,041 colleges, making it one of the leading states in India in terms of higher education infrastructure. A majority of these institutions offer traditional programs in Arts, Commerce, and Science. Importantly, over 60% of colleges are situated in rural and semi-urban areas, highlighting their critical role in expanding educational access to underserved populations (AISHE, 2020–21). These colleges cater largely to first-generation learners, students from agricultural backgrounds, and economically weaker sections, thereby contributing to social mobility and regional development. Despite their importance, rural colleges face several administrative and structural challenges. Issues, such

as, inadequate infrastructure, shortage of qualified faculty, financial constraints, and limited access to digital resources significantly affect the quality of education. Similar observations have been made by the University Grants Commission (UGC, 2021), which highlights disparities in infrastructure and faculty availability between rural and urban institutions. Additionally, studies on rural education point out that governance inefficiencies and resource limitations often hinder institutional growth and innovation (Tilak, 2015). Moreover, the outbreak of COVID-19 further intensified these challenges by disrupting traditional teaching-learning processes. The sudden shift to online education exposed the digital divide, as many students in rural Maharashtra lacked access to smart phones, computers, and steady internet connectivity. Reports by UNESCO (2020) and World Bank (2021) indicate that the pandemic disproportionately affected students in rural and marginalized communities, leading to learning losses, increased dropout rates, and reduced academic engagement. Moreover, post-pandemic observations reveal a decline in regular student attendance, influenced by economic hardships, family responsibilities, and a shift in learning habits towards informal or digital modes. At the same time, the introduction of the National Education Policy 2020 has created new possibilities for reform in higher education. NEP-2020 emphasizes multidisciplinary learning, skill development,

digital integration, and flexible academic structures, including multiple entry and exit options. For rural colleges, this policy provides an opportunity to take benefit of redesigned curricula, introduction of vocational and skill based courses, and enhance employability among students. However, effective implementation requires strong administrative leadership, capacity building, quality teachers and adequate infrastructural support (Ministry of Education, 2020; UGC, 2021). Furthermore, rural Arts, Commerce, and Science colleges serve as important centers for community engagement and local development. They contribute not only to academic advancement but also to social awareness, skill development, and regional empowerment. During the pandemic, many such institutions actively participated in community outreach programs, health awareness campaigns, and support initiatives, reinforcing their role as socially responsible organizations. In this context, institutional administration emerges as a critical factor in addressing existing challenges and leveraging emerging opportunities. Effective governance, strategic planning, and resource optimization are essential for strengthening rural higher education institutions. Therefore, this study aims to examine the administrative challenges faced by Arts, Commerce, and Science colleges in rural Maharashtra and to explore the opportunities available in the post pandemic era within the framework of NEP-2020.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The development of higher education in India, particularly in rural areas, has been widely examined with emphasis on access, equity, and quality. According to the AISHE, higher education has expanded considerably in terms of enrolment and institutional growth; however, regional disparities remain significant, especially between rural and urban institutions (Ministry of Education, 2021). Rural colleges often face constraints in infrastructure, faculty availability, and administrative efficiency in some cases (Agarwal, 2009). Scholars have consistently highlighted administrative and governance related challenges in higher education. Suthar, (2021) notes that lack of transparency, weak institutional governance, and financial limitations hinder institutional effectiveness. Similarly, Tilak, (2015) emphasizes structural inequalities in access and quality, particularly affecting rural institutions. Agarwal, (2009) further argues that expansion without adequate quality assurance mechanisms has led to uneven development in Indian higher education. Studies focusing on rural education reveal that socio-economic factors significantly influence access to higher education. Henry *et al.*, (2024) identify barriers such as financial constraints, lack of awareness, transportation difficulties, and social limitations. In addition, research by Kumar and Ahmad, (2018) highlights that rural students often lack exposure to career opportunities and professional networks, which affects their academic progression. Bhat and Rather, (2019) also emphasize that family income, parental education, and geographic isolation are critical determinants of higher education participation in rural areas. The integration of technology in higher education has emerged as a key area of research. Selwyn, (2016) states that digital inclusion requires not only access to devices but also digital literacy and institutional readiness. The digital divide remains a major concern in rural India, where infrastructure limitations restrict the effective use of technology (Jena, 2020). The outbreak of COVID-19 further exposed these inequalities. Reports by UNESCO, (2020) and

World Bank, (2021) highlight that the pandemic disproportionately impacted rural learners, leading to learning loss, increased dropout rates, and reduced engagement. Recent studies also point to post pandemic challenges, such as, irregular student attendance and reduced classroom participation. According to Jena, (2020), the sudden shift to online learning has altered student learning behavior, creating long term implications for classroom engagement. These developments have placed additional pressure on institutional administration to develop strategies for student retention and academic continuity. The introduction of the National Education Policy 2020 represents a major reform initiative aimed at improving the quality and inclusiveness of higher education. NEP-2020 emphasizes multidisciplinary education, skill development, and flexible learning pathways. As noted by the Ministry of Education, (2020), the policy seeks to transform higher education institutions into holistic and multidisciplinary centers of learning. However, its successful implementation in rural colleges depends on administrative preparedness, faculty training, and infrastructural development (UGC, 2021; Sharma, 2021).

Furthermore, rural colleges play a crucial role in community development and social transformation. Altbach, (2016) highlights that higher education institutions in developing countries contribute significantly to local development by enhancing human capital. In the Indian context, rural colleges act as centers of social awareness, skill development, and community engagement. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many institutions actively participated in awareness campaigns and support initiatives, reinforcing their societal role (UNESCO, 2020). Overall, the literature indicates that while higher education in rural India has expanded significantly, challenges related to administration, infrastructure, required number teaching staff availability and digital access persist. At the same time, policy reforms such as NEP-2020 and advancements in digital education present new opportunities. However, there remains a research gap in understanding how institutional administration can effectively address these challenges, particularly in Arts, Commerce, and Science colleges in rural Maharashtra.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design to examine administrative challenges and opportunities in rural Arts, Commerce, and Science colleges in Maharashtra. Data were collected through secondary sources such as reports of the AISHE, government publications, and research articles, along with primary inputs obtained through structured questionnaires and informal discussions with college administrators and faculty members. The sample includes selected rural colleges offering traditional streams. Data analysis was carried out using simple statistical techniques such as percentage analysis and comparative methods to assess conditions before and after the COVID-19. The study also incorporates a comparative approach to evaluate changes in key administrative factors over time. For the present study Colleges providing professional education are excluded.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The present study examines the administrative challenges faced by Arts, Commerce, and Science colleges in rural

regions of Maharashtra, with particular focus on changes observed before and after the COVID-19. The results are interpreted in light of available empirical evidence from national reports and recent studies. The distribution of Arts, Commerce, and Science colleges in Maharashtra reflects significant structural and regional diversity within the higher education system. According to data derived from the AISHE and state-level reports, Maharashtra has approximately 3,041 general degree colleges, the majority of which offer programs in Arts, Commerce, and Science.

Table 1. Distribution of Arts, Commerce and Science Colleges in Maharashtra

Category	Number of Colleges	Percentage (%)
Total Arts, Commerce & Science Colleges	3,041	100%
Grant-in-Aid Colleges	1,177	38.7%
Non-Grant (Unaided) Colleges	1,836	60.4%
Government Colleges	28	0.9%
Rural Colleges	1,865	61.4%
Urban Colleges	1,176	38.6%

Source: Directorate of Higher Education, Maharashtra. (2021).

Among these, around 38.7% are grant-in-aid institutions, while a larger proportion, 60.4%, operate as private unaided (non-grant) colleges, indicating a growing trend toward privatization in higher education. Government colleges constitute a very small share, accounting for less than 1% of the total. In terms of regional distribution, nearly 61.4% of colleges are located in rural areas, whereas 38.6% are situated in urban regions. This rural predominance highlights the expansion of higher education access beyond metropolitan areas, although concerns regarding quality, infrastructure, and resource availability persist (Government of India, 2020; Directorate of Higher Education, Maharashtra, 2021). The findings indicate that limited access to technology, full time teacher availability and digital infrastructure has emerged as the most significant challenge in the postpandemic period. Prior to COVID-19, the use of digital tools in rural colleges was relatively limited; however, the sudden shift to online learning exposed severe gaps in frequent power failure, internet connectivity, access to devices, and digital literacy. Reports by UNESCO (2020) and World Bank (2021) confirm that students in rural and economically weaker sections were disproportionately affected due to lack of digital access, resulting in interrupted learning and reduced participation.

Resource constraints continue to be a major administrative issue in rural colleges. Evidence from the AISHE, (2020–21) indicates that while the number of institutions has increased, many rural colleges, particularly colleges on non-grant basis, still lack adequate infrastructure, laboratories, and library facilities. The pandemic further strained these resources, as institutions were required to invest in digital platforms and safety measures without sufficient financial support. The study also highlights financial limitations as a persistent and slightly intensified challenge in the post-COVID period. During the pandemic, institutions faced increased expenditure on digital infrastructure, sanitation, and hybrid teaching models. At the same time, revenue sources such as student fees were affected due to economic hardships. According to national level analyses (Ministry of Education, 2021), public funding has not proportionately increased to meet these additional demands, thereby placing financial pressure on institutions, particularly in rural areas.

Another critical finding relates to the shortage of qualified teachers, which has deteriorated in the post-pandemic period. Evidence suggests that faculty recruitment was significantly slowed during and after COVID-19, leading to a backlog of vacancies. Recent reports indicate that a substantial proportion of teaching posts in Maharashtra remain unfilled, affecting the quality of education and the implementation of new academic reforms. Although the government has initiated recruitment drives, the gap between demand and availability of qualified faculty persists (UGC, 2021). A significant post-pandemic trend observed in the study is the decline in student attendance. While attendance levels were relatively stable before COVID-19, the reopening of colleges has seen irregular student participation. This can be attributed to multiple factors, including economic challenges faced by families, increased involvement of students in income generating activities, and a shift in learning preferences due to prolonged exposure to online education. Studies on post-pandemic education trends also report similar patterns of reduced classroom engagement and attendance (UNESCO, 2020). Transportation challenges continue to affect access to higher education in rural areas. Students from remote villages often depend on limited public transport facilities, which impacts their ability to attend classes regularly. Although this issue existed before the pandemic, it remains a consistent barrier to participation and access.

Finally, the study identifies learning loss as a major consequence of the pandemic. The disruption of regular academic activities has resulted in gaps in knowledge, reduced learning outcomes, and lower academic confidence among students. According to the World Bank, (2021), the global education crisis caused by COVID-19 has significantly affected learning levels, particularly in developing countries like India. One of the most notable changes is the increased dependence on digital technology. Before COVID-19, digital tools played a limited supplementary role in teaching-learning processes. However, the pandemic necessitated a complete transition to online education, thereby exposing the digital divide in rural areas. Studies indicate that lack of access to devices, poor internet connectivity, and low digital literacy significantly hindered student participation (World Economic Forum, 2020; Khan & Mohakud, 2020). Student attendance and participation also show a marked decline in the post-pandemic period. Before COVID-19, classroom attendance was relatively stable in rural colleges. However, during and after the pandemic, many students were unable to engage in online learning due to economic constraints and lack of digital access, leading to reduced participation. Even after reopening, irregular attendance persists due to behavioral changes, financial pressures, and disengagement from formal education systems (UNESCO, 2020; Kapur, 2021). Another critical area of concern is learning outcomes. The disruption caused by prolonged institutional closures resulted in significant learning loss. Research suggests that students experienced gaps in knowledge acquisition, reduced academic confidence, and lower performance levels, particularly in rural and underprivileged contexts (Arora *et al.*, 2021; World Bank, 2021). The pandemic also accelerated the adoption of digital teaching methods across institutions. While this transition created opportunities for innovation, it also highlighted the lack of preparedness among rural colleges in terms of infrastructure and faculty training. Studies emphasize that effective integration of technology requires not only access but also institutional readiness and digital competence (Selwyn, 2016; Jena, 2020).

Table 2. Major Administrative Challenges in Rural Colleges (Post-COVID)

Sr. No.	Challenge	Evidence-Based Observation
1	Limited Technology Access	Severe digital divide affecting rural students (UNESCO, 2020; World Bank, 2021)
2	Lack of Resources	Inadequate infrastructure in rural colleges (AISHE, 2021)
3	Financial Constraints	Increased expenditure with limited funding support
4	Teacher Shortage	Recruitment delays and vacancies (UGC, 2021)
5	Decline in Student Attendance	Post-pandemic behavioral and economic impact
6	Transportation Issues	Limited rural connectivity affecting access
7	Learning Loss	Significant academic disruption (World Bank, 2021)

Table3. Comparative Challenges Before and After COVID-19

Challenge	Before COVID-19	After COVID-19	Trend
Technology Access	Limited concern	Major challenge	Significant increase
Resources	Moderate	High	Increase
Funding	Moderate	Moderately High	Slight increase
Teacher Availability	Moderate	High shortage	Increase
Attendance	Stable	Declining	Decrease
Transportation	Moderate	Moderate	No major change
Learning Outcomes	Stable	Declining	Decrease

Furthermore, the rural-urban disparity in education has widened in the post-COVID period. Limited access to digital resources in rural areas has exacerbated existing inequalities, making it more difficult for rural students to compete with their urban counterparts (Rajam *et al.*, 2022).

CONCLUSION

The study highlights that rural Arts, Commerce, and Science colleges in Maharashtra continue to face persistent challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, limited funding, and shortage of qualified teachers. The impact of the COVID-19 has further intensified issues related to digital access, student attendance, and learning loss. The emergence of the digital divide has become a major barrier to effective teaching-learning processes in rural areas. Additionally, irregular student participation reflects changing socio-economic conditions and learning behavior. Despite these challenges, the National Education Policy 2020 offers significant opportunities for reform through digital integration and multidisciplinary education. However, its successful implementation depends on institutional readiness and administrative efficiency. Therefore, a balanced approach focusing on infrastructure development, faculty recruitment, and student support is essential. Strengthening rural higher education is crucial for achieving inclusive growth and regional development.

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