

# THE FUTURE OF INDIA'S RURAL MARKETS

A Transformational Opportunity



# **The Future of India's Rural Markets**

*In the book The Future of India's Rural Markets, consumer insights veteran Kunal Sinha has presented a vivid picture of how Indian rural consumers have been changing and will continue to evolve. Once dismissed as 'hard to reach', 'illiterate', 'media dark', rural India is changing at an ever-increasing pace powered by better connectivity – both roads and mobile. Marketers will find the lessons presented by Kunal of great value as they get ready to tap the exciting potential that Indian rural consumers offer.*

Dr Ambi Parameswaran  
Independent Brand Coach and Founder Brand-Building.com

*The diversity of rural India and its rapid evolution in recent years has bewildered many. Kunal Sinha has studied this transformation for three decades to decode its intricacies that paint a picture of its future over the next three. For every person or institution that wants a piece of this bright future, this book is a treasure trove of opportunities.*

Anish Daryani  
Founder & President Director  
M&C Saatchi Indonesia

*While we have been celebrating the India growth story, what we perhaps missed out on was diversified and inclusive growth. The real power of India rests in its village and unlocking that potential can be a game changer. This book from Kunal Sinha covers deep insights from rural India and the reader will have an immersive experience. Product marketers, agri-tech innovators, students and institutions wanting to do social good can greatly benefit from the book and their actions will lead to a more sustainable growth.*

Anuj Agarwal  
Chief Operating Officer  
ICICI Foundation

*A brilliant analysis by one of the best Asian strategists of our time. Kunal's multidimensional examination of rural markets presents numerous insights and opportunities that can be leveraged by brands and government bodies. With a robust narrative complemented with actual stories, this book is an academic masterpiece with a human touch.*

Ashik Ashokan  
Head of Advisory, APAC  
World Advertising Research Centre (WARC)

*The Future of India's Rural Markets: A Transformational Opportunity by Kunal Sinha is an incredible insight into the importance of rural markets in India, changes which are happening in it with advent of technology and most importantly how to unlock the potential of rural markets. It's a must read for anyone who wants to succeed in complex but exciting rural markets or just enjoy reading about the India that is not so well known.*

Ashish Dobhal  
Regional Director, India Region  
UPL Limited

*The tumultuous beginning to the 21st Century has turned a majority of extant 'wisdom' on the value drivers of global economies upside down and downside up. Clamour for accountability on governance standards that puts sustainability in the centre of governance has created strategic interest in rural markets and its opportunities to re-frame economic priorities. Kunal Sinha's book directs the spotlight on the opportunities in the Indian rural markets – which could well act as a bow light on how technology navigates swathes of rural poor out of poverty, and also inspire the wealthy to discover purpose in their existentialist quest.*

Professor Bibek Banerjee  
Dean, School of Management and Entrepreneurship  
Shiv Nadar University

*The first thing that strikes one while reading through the book is the myriad transformational opportunities that are waiting to be harnessed in the rural markets of India. Each chapter is a pocket map with succinct directions to traverse the multi-faceted villages, brought alive by the stories of their inhabitants; every page provides a new insight and plants a fresh idea.*

Deepa Mathew  
Chief Insights and Digital Marketing Officer  
Ceat Tyres

*For years rural India, in spite of being the dominant majority in terms of spread, fundamentals and population, has yearned for the wings to fly and escape the back-stage tag. The Future of India's Rural Markets by Kunal Sinha reveals the path and trajectory how rural India of today unleashes its dramatic transformation. This book is not just about markets, economics and growth, but delightfully weaves the sociocultural nuances of change in rural India. Must read and keep both for academia and practitioners.*

Prof. Diwakar Shukla  
Dean  
Faculty of Journalism and Creative Studies  
Jagran Lakecity University, India

*Kunal Sinha's book, The Future of India's Rural Markets: A Transformational Opportunity is a welcome addition to the growing literature emerging on Indian rural market. The book is not only well researched but also provides many valuable insights based on his years of work in the field. The data in general reflects a dramatic transformation in the way more and more people from the Indian hinterland are making online purchases and paying digitally. The narrative, especially the chapters sharing case studies of rural men and women, is very inspirational and reflects the mood and manner of the emerging rural economy.*

Prof. Jaishri Jethwaney  
Vice President, NAPSIPAG Centre for Disaster Research (NDRG)  
Former ICSSR Senior Research Fellow & Professor,  
Indian Institute of Mass Communication

*We all understand that the factors bridging the gap between India and Bharat include technology, financial inclusion, education, infrastructure, policies, people's ambitions and pure Indian inventiveness. For all business leaders planning their next move, Kunal vividly brings to life these transforming stories. A truly eye-opening look at rural India.*

Nirmallya Roy Chowdhury  
Founder  
Radicle Advisors – Brand Asset Creators

*Rural India is clearly in policy and market focus; business and academic interest in this large market segment has never been greater. However, current literature on the ongoing transformation, and its drivers has been sketchy. Kunal Sinha brilliantly provides readers the context of rural transformation, amplifying the hidden potential with real-life examples. A must-read for business leaders, marketers, academics, policymakers, development professionals and students alike.*

Prof. Sajal Mukherjee  
Director  
Apeejay Institute of Mass Communication

# The Future of India's Rural Markets: A Transformational Opportunity

BY

**KUNAL SINHA**

*M&C Saatchi Indonesia*



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited  
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2023

Copyright © 2023 Kunal Sinha.  
Published under exclusive licence by Emerald Publishing Limited.

**Reprints and permissions service**

Contact: [permissions@emeraldinsight.com](mailto:permissions@emeraldinsight.com)

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without either the prior written permission of the publisher or a licence permitting restricted copying issued in the UK by The Copyright Licensing Agency and in the USA by The Copyright Clearance Center. Any opinions expressed in the chapters are those of the authors. Whilst Emerald makes every effort to ensure the quality and accuracy of its content, Emerald makes no representation implied or otherwise, as to the chapters' suitability and application and disclaims any warranties, express or implied, to their use.

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-80455-823-2 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-80455-822-5 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-80455-824-9 (Epub)



ISOQAR certified  
Management System,  
awarded to Emerald  
for adherence to  
Environmental  
standard  
ISO 14001:2004.

Certificate Number 1985  
ISO 14001



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*This book is dedicated to the memory of rural marketing pioneer, trailblazer and my teacher, Mr Dwipal Kumar Bose.*

*This page intentionally left blank*

# Contents

Author Biography	<i>xiii</i>
Acknowledgements	<i>xv</i>
Foreword	<i>xvii</i>
Preface	<i>xix</i>
<b>The Changemakers</b>	<b><i>1</i></b>
<b>Part A Why Does Rural India Matter, More Than Ever?</b>	
<b>Chapter 1 The Intersection of Agriculture and Technology</b>	<b><i>5</i></b>
<b>Chapter 2 The Impact and Challenge of Migration</b>	<b><i>9</i></b>
<b>Chapter 3 Faster Economic Growth</b>	<b><i>13</i></b>
<b>Chapter 4 Rural Women – A Catalytic Force</b>	<b><i>17</i></b>
<b>Chapter 5 A Matter of Identity</b>	<b><i>23</i></b>
<b>Chapter 6 Improvement in Health and Education</b>	<b><i>27</i></b>
<b>Chapter 7 Financial Inclusion</b>	<b><i>33</i></b>
<b>Chapter 8 Rural Road Connectivity and Electrification</b>	<b><i>37</i></b>
<b>Chapter 9 Entrepreneurship with a Difference</b>	<b><i>41</i></b>

<b>Preparing for the Future</b>	45
<b>Part B Manifestations of Change in Rural India</b>	
<b>Chapter 10 The Price of Onions</b>	49
<b>Chapter 11 From Subsistence to Competitive Markets – The Modernization of India’s Agriculture Sector</b>	53
<b>Chapter 12 From Farming to Services and Entrepreneurship</b>	61
<b>Chapter 13 From Isolated, Male-dominated Fiefdoms to Connected and Empowered Hubs – The New Gram Panchayat</b>	67
<b>Chapter 14 From Media Dark to Connected Lives</b>	75
<b>Chapter 15 From Handouts to Financial Growth</b>	85
<b>Chapter 16 From Fatalism to Fearless Futures</b>	93
<b>Chapter 17 From Empty Classrooms to Engaging Learning</b>	99
<b>Chapter 18 From Medical Staff Shortages to Digital Healthcare</b>	105
<b>Chapter 19 From Nautanki to Takatak</b>	111
<b>Chapter 20 From Mud Paths to Rural Roads</b>	117
<b>Chapter 21 From Cowdung as Fuel to Renewable Energy</b>	123
<b>Chapter 22 From <i>Haats</i> and <i>Melas</i> to Technology-enabled Marketplaces</b>	129
<b>Chapter 23 From the Plough to Technology-enabled Farming</b>	135
<b>Chapter 24 From Rainfall Dependence to Participative Water Management</b>	141
<b>Chapter 25 From Gram Pradhans to New Age Influencers</b>	149

<b>Part C How to be Meaningful</b>	
<b>Chapter 26 Build Trust Across the Rural Customer Journey</b>	<i>157</i>
<b>Chapter 27 Forge Partnerships for Rural Transformation</b>	<i>165</i>
<b>Chapter 28 Leverage the Opportunity in Agricultural Exports</b>	<i>169</i>
<b>Chapter 29 Understand the Role of Religion</b>	<i>175</i>
<b>Chapter 30 Practice New Approaches in Participatory Research</b>	<i>179</i>
<b>Chapter 31 Unlock Grassroots Innovation</b>	<i>189</i>
<b>Changing the Game</b>	<i>197</i>
References	<i>199</i>
Index	<i>205</i>

*This page intentionally left blank*

## Author Biography

**Kunal Sinha**, Group Chief Strategy Officer at M&C Saatchi Indonesia, is a foresight, brand and digital strategy expert based in Jakarta. He is among the rare marketing executives who has worked in three of the world's four most populous nations – with the most diverse cultural mix imaginable, for over three decades.

Previously, he was Principal Consultant at World Advertising Research Centre, Chief Strategy Officer at Ants Digital, Executive Director – Advisory at Kantar South Asia, where set up a data-driven strategy consulting offer. He ran an independent consulting practice based in Shanghai, was Chairman – Asia Pacific at The Futures Company and spent over 25 years at Ogilvy, JWT and McCann Erickson doing strategic planning, research and consulting across four continents. His work encompasses trend-spotting, cultural strategy and forecasting.

His engagement with rural markets is diverse. From introducing video-vans as a medium for entertainment and distribution in South India, to researching visual literacy among communities that couldn't read or write, to documenting how technology is transforming expression and commerce in rural China, he has been at the forefront of marketing innovation for brands and social causes.

His insights into fast-growth markets are sought by a wide range of firms: global investment banks, domestic and multinational corporations, as well as start-ups. He is a 12-time winner of the WPP Atticus award for original thinking in the marketing services, including three Grand Prix. He was listed in the millennium edition of the Who's Who in the World, has spoken at leading universities including Harvard Business School, Kellogg, Cambridge University, London Business School, Syracuse University, Peking University, University of New South Wales and Australian National University; his views have been quoted in a wide range of global media, including *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Reuters*, BBC Radio, *China Daily*, *Economic Times*.

He is a prolific writer with an output that ranges from academic papers, industry white papers, columns in business and trade media, to six books including two on creativity: the award-winning *China's Creative Imperative* and *Raw: Pervasive Creativity in Asia*.

*This page intentionally left blank*

# Acknowledgements

This book is the realization of my teacher and philosopher's dream. Mr Dwipal Kumar Bose, affectionately called DK by all who knew him, was a rural marketing and development communication pioneer. We shared the same enthusiasm and belief about how rural India could be transformed by technology.

Just before the coronavirus pandemic hit, we chatted about how students (he loved teaching as much as I do), fellow communications professionals and marketers, and even policymakers, needed a contemporary view of rural India, one that had been transformed by partnerships and technology. The idea for this book germinated during those coffee-fuelled conversations, and I began writing in earnest. Through the lockdown months, I'd share my drafts and seek his opinion.

As travel resumed, DK bought a one-way ticket to Dharmashala. His last Facebook post showed him drinking tea as the sun set behind him, then he went peacefully in the night.

This is my tribute.

Once my manuscript was ready, I began my search for a publisher. Nick Wallwork, now Books Commissioning Lead at Emerald, and Christopher Newson, my agent, patiently kept the faith, and found Emerald Publishing for this book. Kousalya Thangarasu from Emerald's editorial team and Rajachitra S from the production team painstakingly guided me through the final stages.

I'm grateful to the anonymous reviewers who helped me add a valuable dimension to the book, as much as they assured us of the need for the book in the business and academic world. The same belief was reposed by Professor Vijay Mahajan, when I sent him the manuscript and requested him to write the foreword. Being endorsed by a scholar of his repute adds so much to the book, and I am extremely grateful.

I enlisted the services of my daughter Sukanya, a sophomore at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, for doing the references, and she has done her job creditably. My wife Sumona and son Shourya have been fabulous supporters of all my writing ventures, and so were they of this one.

*This page intentionally left blank*

# Foreword

For decades, millions of residents of rural India have been viewed by corporations, governments and non-profits as a potential driver of growth. But the sheer scale, dispersion and diversity deterred most players from engaging with this mass of humanity.

That reluctance is in the past. Spurred by technology, enabled by growing investment in infrastructure and accompanied by recognition of the need for social justice, a wave of aspiration is sweeping through families in the countryside. The digital divide is rapidly being bridged, creating new opportunities in livelihood, revolutionizing agriculture, providing access to finance and delivering healthcare and education to even the most remote villages. New online marketplaces allow farmers to get the best price for their produce and sell to buyers anywhere, just as the deep penetration of e-commerce lets them buy from any merchant. With urban markets proving to be challenging, many start-ups are creating business models that tap into the potential in rural markets – and receiving generous funding.

In the context of India's long-term growth story, investment in rural India is a no-brainer. Unlike other large markets that have rapidly urbanized, India's rural population will continue to grow. The new wrinkle in this constant churn of social mobility is the phenomenon of reverse migration, as educated and qualified people choose to return to villages. By investing in modern organic farming, dairy or floriculture, up-skilling young women and men and connecting their handicraft to markets, or even providing platforms for creative expression and monetizing talent, they have made rural India an extremely dynamic, exciting marketplace.

It is this sense of optimism and dynamism that *The Future of India's Rural Markets* captures so well. The book is structured to answer the three fundamental questions: why do rural markets matter, what is the change that is sweeping through them, and how to engage meaningfully with rural consumers.

Through his deep research and facile storytelling, Kunal Sinha has been able to not only document the change, but also provide direction to any enterprise that wishes to take the plunge into the rural market. With over three decades of experience studying the rural and small-town consumers in India, China and South East Asia, and helping brands and non-profits with their rural strategy, I can think of no better person to bring alive the opportunity than him. Senior

business leaders, academics, policymakers as well as students of rural development and marketing will find this a very useful guide to shape their understanding and facilitate decision-making.

As the global and Indian economy seek a return to growth, this book is a timely exposition of the roots.

Professor Vijay Mahajan  
John P. Harbin Centennial Chair in Business, McCombs School of Business,  
University of Texas at Austin  
Author: *RISE of Rural Consumers in Developing Countries*

# Preface

Rural transformation is a process of comprehensive societal change whereby rural societies diversify their economies and reduce their reliance on agriculture; becoming interdependent on distant places to trade and to acquire as well as provide goods, services and ideas (Berdegúe et al., 2014).

Rural transformation is also the reorganization of society in a given space, being embedded within a wider process of structural change that involves the whole of a country. The structural changes involved in rural transformation often require the harnessing of technological knowledge in order to broaden the range of productive activities that rural workers can engage in. Rather than contributing to growth and industrialization only, innovation can be a key factor in addressing urgent developmental challenges, such as healthcare, safe water and sanitation, energy and women's participation.

While global forces drive this transformation, they are mediated by localized social structures, institutional frameworks and local societies with different levels of human agency.

This book explores the reorganization of the institutional frameworks, the gradual disruption of social structures and the interplay of human agency with structural change, much of it made possible by technology.