



*PANEL DISCUSSION ON:*

## **Capacity Building of the Higher Education Institutions for Rural Engagement**

Date: 28 August 2020

Platform: Zoom



INDIAN INSTITUTE  
OF TECHNOLOGY  
**PALAKKAD**

Organised by UBA Cell IIT Palakkad

## **Event description**

India is predominantly a rural country with a two-third population still residing in rural areas. And the steady transition to urbanization over the years is leading to the decline in the rural share in population and workforce. Despite the rise of urbanisation more than half of India's population is projected to be rural by 2050. There are huge developmental disconnections between the rural and urban sectors such as inequity in health, education, incomes and basic amenities as well as employment opportunities - all causing great discontent and large-scale migration to urban areas.

Undoubtedly, the growth and development of the rural economy and population is the panacea to the growth and inclusive development of the country. In order to maneuver this overall growth, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) launched Unnat Bharat Abhiyan (UBA) in 2014, tapping the immense potential of the Higher Education Institutions (HEI). UBA is envisioned to utilise the vast knowledge base of HEIs to transform the living conditions in villages and ameliorate their economic and social conditions. Hitherto, the Indian professional higher education institutions have largely been oriented to cater the mainstream industrial sector and, barring a few exceptions, have hardly contributed directly to the development of the rural sector. UBA aims to create a virtuous cycle between society and an inclusive academic system by providing knowledge and practices for emerging professions and to upgrade the capabilities of both the public and the private sectors in response to the development needs of rural India. In this context, UBA cell of IIT Palakkad as the Regional Coordinating Institute, organised a panel discussion on **Capacity Building of the Higher Education Institutions for Rural Engagement** to encourage the faculty and students of higher education institutions for an inclusive engagement with the rural community. The panel discussion aimed to build the capacity of institutions to work with the people of rural India in identifying development challenges and to evolve appropriate solutions for accelerating sustainable growth.

### **Panelists**

1. Shri S. M Vijayanand, Chairman, Sixth State Finance Commission, Kerala State.
2. Dr. Usha Titus IAS, Principal Secretary, Department of Higher Education, Government of Kerala.
3. Dr. R Ramesh, Associate Professor & Head, Centre for Rural Infrastructure, NIRD&PR, Hyderabad.

4. Dr. C. Kathiresan, Associate Professor & Head, Centre for Panchayati Raj, Decentralised Planning and Social Service Delivery, NIRD&PR, Hyderabad.

Moderator:

Dr. Amrita Roy, Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities, IIT Palakkad.

### **Event Proceedings**

Dr. Amrita Roy in her introductory remarks, explained the context of the panel discussion, introduced the panelists and welcomed the panelists and participants.

#### *Key takeaways from Shri S. M Vijayanand talk*

Initiating the discussion, Shri S.M Vijayanand said that UBA has evolved from the concept of Academic Social Responsibility. He commented that Unnat Bharat Abhiyan can be best operationalised in Kerala because of the experience in mobilising the college students informally for the People's Plan Campaign over the last 20 years. He has also suggested that HEIs should support the Gram Panchayats (GP), support the Self Help Group (SHG) networks and the CSOs which are linked to the Gram Panchayats by handholding Project Ideation, Project Preparation, Troubleshooting, Quality Assurance and Impact Analysis. He informed that all the Gram Panchayats in India are under the process of preparing the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) and the gram panchayats in India will receive an amount of approx. an amount of approx. 8-10 lakh crore in the next five years. He mentioned some broader priority areas such as Local Economic Development coupled with the ecological development, Poverty and Social Justice, User Technologies, Technology for various problems, Mapping of Assets, Rejuvenation of Gram Sabhas etc for prospective interventions by education institutions. He also suggested the participating institutes to devise a system for giving credits to the students for their participation. He proposed a state-level and district-level steering committee involving various stakeholders such as different Universities, IIT, IIM, KILA, LSGD, Higher Education and Panchayat

Departments to identify issues that need interventions from education institutes. He expressed his willingness to take the lead to work out a detailed plan of action for every educational institute in Kerala for an effective rural engagement if the Higher Education Department and Local Self Government Department agree upon.

*Key takeaways from Dr. C. Kathiresan talk*

Dr. C. Kathiresan started his presentation by sharing the vision of the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India -“rural transformation through sustainable development”. He discussed various NIRDPR approaches in the area of sustainable rural development such as i) Cluster approach where the selected Gram Panchayats will act as “action laboratories” or “learning labs” for other neighbouring GPs, ii) Action research/short studies in Panchayat Governance for the dissemination of best practices, iii) Saturation approach for skilling for wage and self-employment etc. Later he discussed NIRDPR’s Model GP Clusters Project in detail. NIRDPR initiated an ‘Action Research Project for 100+ Clusters Development Programme’ mainly with the support from the corporate sector to create model GPs and model GPDPs to motivate other GPs. It is done through the institutional strengthening of GPs and enablement of quality GPDP. He also discussed the most important entry-level activities, major activities, key deliverables and outcomes in those projects.

*Key takeaways from Dr. Usha Titus IAS talk*

Dr. Usha Titus initiated her discussion by briefing the areas where the students are participating with the local bodies besides Unnat Bharat Abhiyan. She has enumerated the activities of National Service Scheme (NSS) units in the colleges. NSS units select one administrative ward from the neighbouring GP and spend their time during their vacation in this selected place and do the mapping of the ward and then identify the problems. The main activities undertaken by NSS group also include the construction of houses for the homeless, distribution of organic seeds, awareness programs, and other sensitization programmes. She

also highlighted the potential of the student group to intervene and involve during emergency situations such as natural calamities (flood, pandemic etc). She said that the whole idea of Unnat Bharat Abhiyan is that the HEIs should not remain as an island of knowledge, in fact, they should leverage their knowledge in the benefit of villages they adopted. She said that there is a clear communication gap between the local bodies and higher educational institutions. She also stated that the education institutes often fail to understand or identify the needs of local bodies where the local bodies fail to approach the education institutions to address their concerns. She has also suggested forming a group of faculty from different education institutions and building their capacities for rural engagement.

#### Key takeaways from Dr. R Ramesh talk

Dr. Ramesh started his discussion saying that the crux of UBA program is that Science, Technology and Management can play a key role in enhancing the quality of life and in enabling the people to achieve the dignity of life. He said that some technological or innovative interventions do not reach the rural people and produce the outcomes as expected due to many reasons. He also shared his experience of reviewing technological proposals of UBA. Later in his presentation, he shared about the scope of different departments like Computer Science, Electrical Engineering, Home Science, Civil Engineering, Agriculture as well as Arts & Science institutes in the rural development process. His talk mainly discussed the activities that an HEI can initiate.

#### Question and Answer section

The moderator asked Shri S.M Vijayanad if there is a possibility for the LSGs to set up a unit that will actively seek technical help from HEIs as the education institutions struggle to coordinate the engagement. Shri S.M Vijayanad replied that it is possible if the government proactively facilitates the formation of such a unit for coordinating the interventions and he also suggested both HEIs and local bodies to brainstorm in order to come up with a list of plans

for possible interventions. He also mentioned the possibility of utilizing the 10% of finance commission grant for capacity building activities as an answer to the moderator's question regarding meeting operational cost and support from the State government.

While discussing the possible intervention in the rural areas during COVID-19, Dr. Kathiresan shared some interesting and inspiring experiences during the pandemic such as holding small meetings, motivating young fellows to work with the Panchayats, online connect etc. Considering the HEIs being the external unit, the moderator asked Dr. Ramesh about the possible interventions to address the issues concerning the social living conditions (such as alcoholism, autonomy or respect for women etc) to achieve holistic development. He commented that these are sensitive issues which need attention and involve a change in personal and social behaviour of the communities. As an answer to a question regarding different competitions such as Kerala Reboot Hackathon and Smart India Hackathon helping the student group in understanding the problems of rural areas. She explained that in Kerala reboot hackathon, there was a huge participation from the students and they worked on real-life problems that were posted by the officers from various government departments. She also answered a question from the chat box regarding the possibility of providing credits to students who engage in rural development activities. She accepted it as a good suggestion and agreed to look upon it.

The panel discussion was indeed fruitful with an active participation of 120+ participants in the Zoom platform and 50+ participants in Youtube. Further, as suggested by the panelists, IIT Palakkad agreed to work with the collective initiatives which enhance the involvement of HEIs in rural development.

#### Follow up plans

1. Formation of State and District steering committees involving various stakeholders to identify issues that need intervention from higher education institutes.

2. Development of action plan for the Wayanad district in collaboration with NIRDPR and State Government.
3. State-level planning for rural development by incorporating all the UBA institutes.
4. Adoption of a cluster-based approach for village development
5. Encouraging students to work on rural issues as part of BTech/ MTech projects

Youtube link of the recorded session:

[Capacity Building of the Higher Education Institutes for Rural Engagement](#)