Report

SEMINAR-CUM-ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION:

BRIDGING HIGHER EDUCATION AND RURAL COMMUNITIES: PATHWAYS TO SUSTAINABLE RURAL TRANSFORMATION

Organized by

UNNAT BHARAT ABHIYAN (UBA), PANJAB UNIVERSITY, CHANDIGARH

Sponsored by:

RASHTRIYA UCHCHATAR SHIKSHA ABHIYAN (RUSA)

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Panjab University, Chandigarh, through its Unnat Bharat Abhiyan (UBA) cell, organised a Seminar-cum-Round Table Discussion titled *Bridging Higher Education and Rural Communities: Pathways to Sustainable Rural Transformation* in the Seminar Hall of the Indian Council for Social Science Research, North Western Regional Centre (ICSSR-NWRC) on 30 September 2026, with sponsorship from RUSA. The event examined how Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) can build meaningful and reciprocal relationships with rural communities. Unnat Bharat Abhiyan is the flagship programme of the Ministry of Education, launched in 2014 and initiated with IIT Delhi. Under it, each participating HEI adopts a cluster of five villages. Panjab University has adopted five villages on the periphery of Chandigarh and has undertaken surveys, programmes and interactions in them, while also learning from these spaces.

Inaugural Session (10:00 a.m.)

The dignitaries on the dais were Prof. Satvinderpal Kaur (Department of Education, Panjab University, and Coordinator, UBA, Panjab University), Prof. P.K. Singh (National Consultant, UBA; associated with IIT), Prof. Savita Gupta (Director, Research and Development Cell, Panjab University), Dr. Upendra Nath Roy (Regional Coordinator, UBA, NITTTR Chandigarh) and Prof. Ganga Ram Chaudhary (Director, RUSA). Representatives of the villages surveyed under the programme, including Tira and Soonk, were also welcomed. The proceedings began with the Panjab University anthem.



Welcome Address

Prof. Satvinderpal Kaur extended a formal welcome to the panellists, academicians, social workers, representatives of the adopted villages and principals of rural schools. She introduced UBA as an expression of Mahatma Gandhi's vision, in which the idea of India is tied to its villages, and stressed that any discourse on development must acknowledge the margins. Drawing on the thought of John Dewey and Krishna Kumar, she described the village as a great source of knowledge. She posed several questions for the day: whether the development of Chandigarh has extended to the five adopted villages, what perspectives these villages can offer, and how the disconnect between the intelligentsia and rural communities may be addressed.



Keynote Address: Prof. P.K. Singh

Prof. Singh recalled his long association with UBA and outlined its purpose: to bring universities into conversation with rural realities, to learn from rural wisdom, and to solve problems through hands-on engagement, termed "rural immersion." He identified the mission of the programme as knowledge sharing, a participatory approach and convergence, and linked it to the mandate of NEP 2020 to connect higher education with rural communities.

He described the organisational structure of UBA, which extends from the Ministry of Education to voluntary organisations on the ground, and cited the following figures:

- 620 districts covered
- 5,462 participating institutions
- 25,887 UBA network villages
- 17,641 gram panchayats

The thematic areas of the programme include sustainable agricultural systems, water resource management, renewable energy systems, basic amenities such as schools, artisans, rural industries and livelihoods. The work plan expected of participating institutions includes forming a UBA cell, conducting village *adhyayan* (study), participating in gram sabhas and convergence activities, implementing an action plan, communicating with the Regional Coordinating Institute, and uploading field data through the ERP portal.

Prof. Singh offered examples of successful engagement. IIT Roorkee trained villagers in making scented candles and supported their sale and marketing, creating livelihoods. In Haridwar, flowers and assorted waste were converted into incense sticks (agarbattis) and sold in the market. He also cited the work of IIT Delhi across 11 gram panchayats in Uttarakhand, and of HEIs across the country.

He noted that UBA promotes convergence, with nineteen collaborations listed, and that Subject Expert Groups aligned with UBA themes can offer solutions and proposals through the online portal. He also mentioned a two-credit UGC course under UBA, in which 52,000 students have enrolled through a MOOC. The intended outcomes are an understanding of rural realities, sustainable knowledge interventions, rural internships and community engagement.

Address by Prof. Upendra Nath Roy: Role of the Regional Coordinating Institute

Prof. Roy noted the long-standing association of NITTTR with education in the rural sector and observed that the vision of UBA was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam. He listed sectoral priorities for Punjab, including diversification of agriculture, promotion of organic farming, drug-related issues and wastewater management. He described NITTTR's problem-solving engagement in Chaukpuri, Bijnor, Varanasi and villages in Punjab, including interventions such as soak pits and smoke-free kitchens, and offered case studies. He emphasised interdisciplinary research into rural development and outlined a “herbanic revolution.”

Address by Prof. Savita Gupta

Prof. Gupta spoke of the disparity and distance between HEIs and rural life. She praised Gandhi's promotion of rural wisdom and called for the revival of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS). She argued that a unilateral "lab to land" approach is not sufficient, and that sustainable solutions found in villages were lost during the industrial revolutions. Engagement with rural communities, she said, should be approached as responsibility rather than charity. She advocated establishing "living labs" within the university and rural internships for students.

Prof. Gupta then felicitated the representatives of the rural communities. The session was followed by a tea break at 11:45 a.m.



Panel Discussion (12:00 p.m.)

Chair: Prof. Krishna Kumar

Panellists: Prof. Krishna Kumar (educationist; formerly of Delhi University and NCERT); Prof. R. Ramesh (National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, Hyderabad); Prof. Devinder Sharma (writer and food policy analyst); Prof. Jyoti Dalal (Institute of Home Economics, Delhi University); Prof. Akshaya Kumar (Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University)



Prof. R. Ramesh

Prof. Ramesh addressed why surveys and Participatory Rural Appraisals (PRAs) are conducted: to understand the socio-economic and cultural context of the village in which one works. He cautioned against rushing to solutions without survey and observational work, and stressed the need to identify ultimate rather than proximate causes. Researchers should observe who participates in gram panchayats and who avoids them, and must attend to cultural norms, beliefs and behaviours, as illustrated by the example of waste segregation.

Prof. Devinder Sharma

Prof. Sharma recalled the government's endeavour, a few years earlier, to raise farmers' incomes, and cited a survey figure of Rs. 1,750 as the average monthly income across seventeen states. He argued that the socio-economic context must be understood before solutions are attempted, and that technological innovation alone does not raise incomes.

He recounted that in 1996, under the first NDA government, an economists' panel was asked which farmer policies would ensure the absence of anti-incumbency. He advised that, since about 60% of the population is rural, 60% of the budget should be allotted to rural concerns. A call from the Prime Minister's Office followed, and the next day the new Finance Minister, Yashwant Sinha, announced that 60% of the budget would go to agriculture and rural

development. In 1998, the BJP's national development strategy advocated the same. He called for higher budgetary allocation to rural areas.

Regarding UBA, he observed that students of agricultural universities are often unaware of agrarian crises and the state of villages, and that technological innovation without experiential engagement is futile. He expressed confidence that Generation Z is capable of finding solutions, proposed policy-level changes in budgetary allocations, and held that academia has failed to highlight these crises.

Prof. Jyoti Dalal

Prof. Dalal began with the dichotomy between rural and urban. Labels such as “heritage village” and “tourist village” on one side, and “smart city” and “thrill city” on the other, reflect a simplistic understanding formed without engaging with or living in villages. Villages are romanticised as archaic, traditional, unchanging and naïve, while cities are seen as planned, progressive, hectic and future-oriented. Development discourse conducted from the vantage point of the city will always deem the village backward and lacking, and this dichotomy prevents understanding of the village.

She argued that the rural and urban are entangled, and that recognising this is key to understanding notions of progress and development. Development discourse seeks to close the gap between rural and urban in a way that leaves only the urban as the whole, with urban policies and models imposed upon villages. Every village is unique in its history, culture and language. She noted that Gandhi located *swaraj* in the village, whereas Ambedkar saw a glimmer of hope in the city, and asked why the movement from rural to urban could not be reversed. Changes in villages, she observed, are informed by urban perspectives.

Prof. Akshaya Kumar

Prof. Akshaya Kumar spoke of the scholar's obligation towards his or her surroundings, social context and periphery, and held that syllabi must take these contexts into account. Noting that the solutions discussed in the session were tangible and policy-oriented, he turned to the intangibles: the ideological distance from the mindset prevailing in the village, and the compartmentalisation of these issues within academia in place of hands-on engagement. He argued that academia is unable or unwilling to engage with the limits of inflexibility in rural

discourse, such as sensitivity on gender and caste. Referring to Ambedkar's hopes, he urged scholars to narrate stories that can produce a discourse of emancipation, equality and social rights.



Question and Answer Session

The discussion covered themes ranging from the dissolution of Punjabi communities over the past forty years despite efforts on the ground, and the disaffection among youth fostered by education, aspiration and capitalism; the distinction between villages on the peripheries of cities and those further inland; the need to study rural political economy, and the eradication of caste through the distribution of the means of production. Prof. Sharma noted the collapse of the agricultural sector in the West and argued that Indian policy is oriented towards recreating that scenario. He observed that over six crore people have returned to agriculture and held that progress should come through agriculture, via investment in the sector. Prof. Akshaya Kumar spoke against mandatory credit courses and rural internships, calling them “cosmetic measures” that would not encourage a change in mindset or motivation.

Concluding Remarks by the Chair

Prof. Krishna Kumar observed that the history of higher education in India is an urban one, with a mental framework oriented around the city, so that escaping the village becomes an aspiration or a part of the city is brought into rural spaces. He recalled Prof. Anil Sadgopal’s

efforts to transform rural education in 1969 and cited his view that the end-goal of higher education is social justice for everyone, touching also on the debates between Gandhi and Ambedkar on urbanisation. He criticised the state's top-down attempts to impose urban models upon villages and turn villages into cities. He agreed with Prof. Sharma that cities are themselves imploding, leading to significant rural remigration, and expressed hope that the efforts of UBA would expand, prosper and bear fruit.

The panellists were felicitated by Prof. Satvinderpal Kaur.

Round Table Discussion (2:00 p.m.)

Chair: Prof. Kuldip Puri (Retired Professor, Department of Education, SOL, Panjab University)

Participants: Prof. Ranjit Singh Ghuman (Professor of Eminence, School of Economics, GNDU, Amritsar); Prof. Ashutosh Kumar (Department of Political Science, Panjab University); Prof. Kumool Abbi (Department of Sociology, Panjab University)

Prof. R.S. Ghuman

Prof. Ghuman welcomed the discussion of rural issues within the university. He noted that rural Punjab suffered in the 1980s, with many compelled to migrate and disown their villages, and observed that the village has been central to the Indian imagination since Independence. Since the majority of Punjab lives in villages, he said, ownership of the rural space is important, and solutions follow from it. The economic, political and cultural divide between city and village has continued to widen.

He shared statistics from his studies on rural education, criticised the dwindling public education system in Punjab, the decline in higher education enrolment and the lack of research on it, and discussed the decline in the quality of higher education in villages. He advocated industrialisation of villages to uplift them economically, stating that Punjab is no longer an agricultural state, and pointed to an organic link between higher education and human capital. He cited Romesh Chandra's observation that rural industrialisation has not been accompanied by higher incomes or employment, and argued for providing urban amenities to rural areas.

Prof. Ashutosh Kumar

Referring to the novel *Raag Darbari*, Prof. Ashutosh Kumar spoke of what students of HEIs can learn from villages under UBA, and of the inclusivity of such institutions. He cited Atul Kohli on the North-South divide, noting that the South is progressing owing to "reform states," social and economic advancement and "movement politics." He held that HEIs must shoulder responsibility and cannot rely entirely on the state, and commented on the decline of prestigious educational institutions and the state's role in it.

He expressed admiration for the UBA scheme, attributed Punjab's rapid urbanisation to flaws in its developmental models, and said the state is suffering the consequences of the Green Revolution. He observed that modern politicians are not meaningfully bound to villages and are therefore unaccountable. The presence of female students in UBA and similar schemes, he noted, sends an important message to the rural populace. He reiterated the responsibility of universities.

Prof. Kumool Abbi

Prof. Abbi spoke positively of advancements in women's empowerment over the years, citing statistics on literacy, mortality and total fertility rate, while also highlighting the persistent rural-urban divide within these figures. She noted state efforts to consolidate these gains and criticised the movement towards consumerism, which she linked to various social ailments.

Open Discussion

Ms. Anshu, research scholar in the Department of Education, Panjab University, shared her experiences leading a survey team to the village of Tira. She noted the absence of women representatives from the village at the seminar. The Principal of the government school in Soonk village described her experiences running the school over two years. Both observed a lack of active participation by women. Prof. Kuldeep Singh spoke at length on the problems of adopting an urban perspective.



The discussion among panellists and audience members touched upon a variety of issues, such as: potential blind spots in debates on rural development itself; the continuing gap between academic discourse and rural implementation; mobilising youth towards these goals; centring concrete issues informed by the lived experiences of villagers; the sociopolitical impact of land acquisition; lack of awareness about structural challenges; the influence of caste on educational choices.

Remarks by the Chair

Prof. Puri pointed to older policy papers concerning the UGC and to the absence of student elections and politics in HEIs in Punjab. He agreed with Prof. Ashutosh Kumar that the modern person is uprooted and detached from the earth, as is Punjab's political class. He advised against mimicking the "colonial masters" who sought to impose their ideas of civilisation and development on the masses, and referred to the literacy movement.

The participants were felicitated by Dr. Satvinderpal Kaur.



Valedictory Session

The Vice-Chancellor, Prof. Meenakshi Goyal, joined the dignitaries, commended the initiative of the Panjab University UBA team and wished it success. Dr. Sumandeep Kaur then presented the report of the proceedings, and Prof. R. Ramesh delivered a brief valedictory address. Prof. Satvinderpal Kaur proposed the vote of thanks. The seminar concluded with the national anthem.

