Delivery Channels in Indian Banking Sector: A Study of Rural Areas

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ABSTRACT

Banking industry has undergone a paradigm shift in its business operations i.e., from branch and mortar model to branchless banking. Apart from traditional business models, new channels of distribution are being adopted from time to time. In this paper, an attempt has been made to analyze the adoption of new delivery channels since onwards. The paper also focused on the problems and challenges in adopting alternative delivery channels and suggested remedial measures.

Keywords: *Rural, Branchless banking, delivery channels.*

INTRODUCTION

A large population spread over vast geographical base has made it difficult for banks to reach out to every individual and provide them with access to banking. Banks are providing services through a variety of business outlets viz. branches, extension counters, satellite offices, mobile branches, ultra-small branches. However, with the advent of rapid technological and regulatory changes the outreach methods are redefined. RBI has adopted two modes for delivering banking services in India which are as under:

1. Brick and mortar model or Branch banking model.
2. Alternative delivery channels or Branchless banking model.

OBJECTIVES

1. To study the growth and status of branch banking model.

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2. To study the status of various digital delivery channels.

3. To study the bank branches in rural and urban areas per 100000 population.

4. To study the year-wise progress of business correspondent model.

5. To analyze the year-wise share of total banking outlets to brick and mortar model and branchless banking

BRICK AND MORTAR OR BRANCH BANKING MODEL

It is the traditional method of banking that has been prevalent for decades where customers in order to avail banking services tend to visit nearest branch of a bank during the banking hours. A branch will include a full-fledged specialized branch, a satellite office,an extension counter, service branch etc.

Satellite Offices: As per RBI policy of 2014, where the banks do not find it viable to open branches in rural or unbanked areas, they were allowed to open satellite offices. These offices were controlled from a base branch which can be located at a central village/block. These branches work on few specified days in a week and at specified hours.

Extension Centers: Banks were permitted to open extension centers within the premises of big offices, factories, hospitals, military units, educational institutions where most of the staff do not have access to banking facilities at a reasonable distance.

Mobile Branches: Mobile branches were set up in Tier III to Tier VI centers where there is no branch network. Under this, banking services are delivered through mobile vans that visit the places proposed to be served on specific hours/working days.

Ultra Small Branches: As per RBI guidelines issued in 2012, banks were advised to set up ultra-small branches where opening a conventional brick and mortar branch is not viable. Ultra small branch can be set up between base branch and business correspondent's location to providesupport to 8-10 BC units at a reasonable distance of 3-4 kilometers.

GROWTH OF RURAL BANKING BY COMMERCIAL BANKS IN INDIA

Branch expansion is one of the most important indicators of expanding the banking as it fosters development by mobilization of deposits as well as granting loans for meeting the credit needs of people.

Table: 1.1

Growth of rural banking by commercial banks in India (1969-2019)

(Rs. in lac)

Year	Number of bank branches in rural areas	% of total	Deposit Mobilized in rural areas	% of total	Credit Deployed in rural areas	% of total	Credit-Deposit ratio in rural areas	Credit Deposit ratio at All India level
1969	1443	17.6	30600	6.3	11500	3.3	37.6	71.9
1972	5274	36	54000	6.5	25700	4.6	47.7	67.2
1975	7112	35.5	11710	8.5	60800	6	51.9	73.5
1978	12534	42.5	260640	10.1	153000	8.4	57.4	69.1
1981	19453	51.2	526158	13.02	306170	11.4	58.19	66.46
1984	25541	52.9	924316	14.37	674095	14.83	72.93	70.7
1987	30585	56.2	1552163	14.33	974517	15.11	62.78	59.51
1991	35216	58.1	3100980	15.46	1859897	14.97	59.98	61.93
1994	35379	57.2	4933114	15.23	2467035	14.03	50.01	54.29
1997	32909	50.5	7376970	14.74	3252522	11.44	44.09	56.81
2000	32673	48.7	12053919	14.67	4875339	10.6	43.36	56.01
2003	32303	48.55	17650239	13.83	7715335	10.21	39.04	59.24
2006	30610	43.25	22606119	10.81	12607834	8.33	55.77	72.39
2009	31549	38.57	34351019	8.76	20792613	7.30	57.14	72.61
2012	35936	35.65	57318603	9.43	38051767	7.92	66.39	79.02
2015	47191	36.17	96710043	10.89	60832305	8.84	62.90	77.45
2018	50137	35.15	118453968	10.35	71412515	8.35	60.29	74.77
2019	52183	35.94	150499027	11.90	88605567	9.76	58.87	71.71
EGR	7.04		16.67		17.55			

Source: Data compiled from Basic Statistical Return, RBI (1969-2019)

Table 1.1 depicts that between the period 1969 to 2019, the number of rural branches increased from 1443 to 52183. This post-nationalization significantly improved the branch network of commercial banks especially in rural areas. The number of branches of commercial banks in rural areas increased during the period 1969 to 1975 and this increase was manifold and their share increased from 17.6 per cent to 35.5 per cent during the same period. Further, the period between 1978 to 1991, the share of branches increased due to the banking sector reforms that began in 1990s. Moreover, after the banking sector reforms were initiated, the above policy perspectives underwent a change, and as a result, the share of branches in rural areas witnessed a gradual fall since 1991. The deposits mobilised by these branches amounted to Rs. 30600 lac and accounted for only 6.3 per cent of the total share and out of the total credit financed, only 3.3 per cent was financed in rural areas during 1969. During the initial years, the total credit deployed in rural areas has seen an upsurge from 1969 to 1992 but thereafter, there has been a gradual fall up to 2013. It was only during the recent years that the share of credit deployed in rural areas witnessed a rising trend. Further, table shows that the CD ratio was less during the initial years and after 1983, it was maintained at 60 per cent up to the year 1990. It also shows the gradual fall till 2006 and after introduction of financial inclusion plans, it again started gaining the momentum in rural areas.

STATUS OF BRANCH EXPANSION OF COMMERCIAL BANKS IN INDIA SINCE 2005:

In the year 2005-06 a new policy was formulated to spread the banking in rural areas.

Table: 1.2
Status of branch expansion of commercial banks in India since 2005

Year	Rural areas	% Share	Semi-urban areas	% Share	Urban Share	% Share	Metropolitan Share	% share	Total
2005	31967	45.69	16203	23.16	12100	17.29	9699	13.86	69969
2010	32320	37.17	21309	24.50	15799	18.17	17532	20.16	86960
2015	47191	36.17	35715	27.37	23096	17.70	24480	18.76	130482
2019	52183	35.94	40626	27.98	25784	17.76	26598	18.32	145191
EGR	3.27		6.13		5.04		6.73		4.87
Average	39020.20		27659.8		25784		19819.33		105093.2
SD	8275.31		9423.8		5313.59		5584.65		28346.46
CV	61.26		39.88		46.93		36.47		48.2

Source: (Various Reports of Basic Statistical Returns of Scheduled Commercial Banks in India, RBI)

The above table reflects that in accordance with the efforts put up by RBI, the total number of branches of commercial banks increased from 69969 to 145191 showing the growth rate of 4.87 per cent over the period 2005 to 2019. During the period of study, maximum proportion of branches of commercial banks were in rural areas followed by semi-urban, urban and metro cities. Branches in rural areas have shown the growth rate of 3.27 per cent which was lowest among other population group-wise branch expansion of commercial banks in India. Further, the percentage share of branches in rural areas has shown a decline from 45.69 per cent to 35.94 per cent over the period and the percentage share of branches in semi-urban, urban and metro cities increased with the growth rate of 6.13, 5.04 and 6.73per cent respectively over the period.

Further, the number of bank branches per lac population is one of the important measures of the extent of demographical penetration of banking services. With the consistent efforts of RBI, the availability of bank branches per lac population has been continuously increasing.

Table: 1.3

Number of bank branches in rural and urban areas per 100000 population

Year	Rural Areas	Urban Areas
2005	3.93	11.33
2010	3.79	14.31
2015	5.35	19.40
2019	5.82	19.75

Source: (Complied from World Bank reports and various reports of RBI)

It was found in the table 1.3 that, over the last years, the branch penetration has increased from 3.93 in 2005 to 5.82 in rural areas whereas in urban areas, it has increased from 11.33 to 19.75 indicating that there has been a more geographical spread of bank branches in urban areas as compared to rural areas. Further, it can be inferred that in the year 2019, 20 branches in urban areas and only 6 branches in rural areas caters to the banking requirements of one lakh population.

RBI has been continuously stimulating the expansion of banking sector by extending the banking network through setting up of new brick and mortar delivery channels and widening the scope of business correspondents, installing new ATMs/ WLA in every tier. Besides this, various measures like opening of no-frills zero balance and Jan Dhan accounts, DBT schemes, issuance of Rupay cards, issuance of Kisan credit cards, Adhaar enabled schemes have already been implemented by the government which has expanded the banking sector over the years and, as a result 80 per cent of Indians (age 15+ years) have account ownership at a bank or with mobile money service provider which stood at only 35 per cent in 2011 (World Bank Report, 2017).

ALTERNATIVE DELIVERY CHANNELS

Over the years, banks have been going slow with their branch expansion and shifting to various other alternate delivery channels. The government and RBI have been very active in taking banking services to the grass root level. Various steps were taken up to promote alternate delivery channels and it varies significantly from the branch based banking model. The government of India has recognized the potential of the branchless banking model and, in the year 2006, different channels were adopted for delivering banking services. Branchless banking is a concept of providing banking services outside the conventional bank branches by either using third party organization namely business correspondents (BCs) or by using other modes including information and communication technology services (offsite rural ATMs, mobile vans, internet banking etc.)

Branch Less Banking Model: During the second phase of post-liberalization reforms, RBI introduced the concept of branchless banking model which is as follows:

Business Correspondents / Bank Mitars (BCs/BMs): It is a branchless model that is ideally an extended arm of the bank, and is vital in the promotion of banking services. It helps in expanding the outreach of banks to unbanked and under-banked regions. In January 2016, Reserve Bank of India issued important guidelines that allowed banks to use third party services to deliver timely services related to banking outside the bank branches and for this purpose, RBI allowed business correspondents/business facilitators to act as bank agents in order to increase the inclusion of people who are excluded from formal sources of finance and to provide banking services at places where bank branches do not exist. RBI has permitted for every BC to provide banking services for a minimum of four hours per day for at least five days a week to be counted as a banking outlet as per Branch Authorization Policy 2017 (RBI Notification, 2017). To strengthen financial inclusion, RBI has relaxed branch authorization policy in 2017 wherein fixed point BC outlets serving more than four hours a day and five days a week are treated at par with physical brick and mortar branch. (RBI, Report). As on March 2020, around 10 lac BCs across rural and urban India were engaged in providing banking services (RBI, Report).

Table: 1 .4

Year-wise progress of business correspondents

	2010	2015	2019	EGR	Average	SD	CV
Banking outlets in Villages>2000-BCs	8390	91545	130687	27.46	73120.40	41020.18	6.42
Banking outlets in Villages<2000-BCs	25784	333337	410442	27.67	261265.20	163762.80	6.28
Total Banking outlets in Villages-BCs	34174	424882	541129	27.62	334385.60	203105.27	6.32
percentage of total banking outlets in villages-BCs out of total banking outlets	51.28	89.28	90.66				
Banking outlets in Villages -Total	66636	475894	596849	21.92	380654.90	211129.49	11.16

Source:(RBI, Various reports)

As shown in Table 1.4 that total banking outlets in villages increased from 66636 to 596849 showing a growth rate of 21.92 per cent over the period 2009- 2010 to 2018- 2019 and it can be seen that banking outlets in the villages through business correspondents increased from 34174 to 541129 showing a growth rate of 27.62 per cent. During this period, the share of banking outlets in villages through business correspondents in the rural areas has witnessed an exceptional increase from 51.28 per cent to 90.66 per cent. Business correspondents have played an active role in villages and branch expansion has remained subdued in comparison to adoption of BC model during the time period of the study.

Table:1.5

Year-wise share of total banking outlets to brick and mortar model and branchless banking

	2010	2015	2019
Banking outlets in villages- Branches	32320	47191	52183
% share to total banking outlets in Villages	48.50	9.92	8.74
Branchless banking	34316	428703	544666
% share to total branchless banking in Villages	51.50	90.08	91.26
Banking outlets in villages -Total	66636	475894	596849

Source: (Compiled from Table 5.3)

Along with increasing brick and mortar presence through branch expansion RBI has also encouraged banks to adopt other branchless modes such as BC outlets, other modes like offsite rural ATMs, mobile vans etc. to extend the coverage of unbanked population. It can be seen that out of total banking outlets in villages, the number of branches increased from 32320 in 2010 to 52183 in 2019 and the proportion of bank branches to banking outlets decreased showing the growth rate of 3.27 per cent. The share of branches to total banking outlets decreased from 48.50 per cent to 8.74 per cent and the total banking outlets through branchless banking model increased from 34316 to 544666 showing the proportionate share in the range of 51.50 per cent to 91.26 per cent over the period of study.

DIGITAL DELIVERY CHANNELS

With the adoption of technology, it has been possible to deliver banking services at the doorstep in rural areas. Banks are offering digital delivery channels such as mobile banking, ATMs, internet banking digital banking kiosks to deliver services to the customers with the expectation of increasing profitability and reducing operating cost.

Undoubtedly, digital mediums have increased the level of financial inclusion globally from 51 per cent in 2011 to 69 per cent in 2017 (Global Findex Database 2017). But in high-income economies, 91 percent of adults use digital payments method, while in developing economies, just 44 per cent of adults make digital payments through their accounts (Global Findex Database 2017) due lack of education, lack of infrastructure and weak internet connectivity. In fact, these are the main issues which hinder the adoption of digital banking channels in India. Mobile banking, M Wallets, Micro ATMs, Solar ATMs are some of the initiatives taken up by RBI to expand banking services especially in rural areas (ICUBE, Report 2019).

Mobile Banking: Mobile banking has emerged as one of the digital delivery channels for extending banking services. It is a form of branchless banking that allows people to access banking services and conduct financial transactions through mobile phones to every segment of banking clientele in general and the unbanked in particular. The operative guidelines for banks on mobile banking transaction in India were issued by RBI on October 8,2008. Apart from regulatory measures related to M- banking, Reserve Bank of India has also set up a new origination called National Payment Credit Council in the year 2008. As per RBI guidelines, banks were permitted to offer mobile banking services after obtaining necessary permission from the department of payment & settlement systems. During the first year of its operation in 2008-2009, 32 banks were granted permission to operate mobile banking in

India. In the consultation paper of TRAI (2013), it was mentioned that significant percentage of the households i.e. 41.30 per cent does not even have a bank account. In that case, mobile phones are used as a channel to promote banking services especially in unbanked areas. As per thereport, tele-density of rural subscribers has reached 59.48 per cent in Feb. 2021. Thus, through mobilebanking various banking services are delivered in urban as well as rural areas (IBEF Report, 2021).

Table 1.6
Growth of mobile banking in India

Year	Volume of transactions (million)	Value of transactions (Rs.in billion)
2012	25.56	18.21
2015	171.90	1035
2019	6200.32	29584.07

Source: (Various Monthly Bulletin Reports, RBI.)

It can be seen from the table 1.6 that growth in the number of mobile banking transactions up to the year 2014 was less but after the introduction of Digital India Scheme in 2015, the volume of digital transactions using mobile banking channels have witnessed a sharp annual increase which stood at 389.49mn in 2015-2016 and increased up to 6200.32mn in 2019 at All India level.

Mobile Wallets: A mobile wallet is an easy alternate channel to carry cash in digital format. According to Tech Sci Research Report, mobile wallet market in India was US$ 6.6 billion in 2020 and is projected to record an exponential growth on account of rising smart phone penetration rate, growing mobile internet user base, and increasing government support. Consequent to the passing of Payment and Settlement Systems Act, 2007, banks and non-banking entities have been issuing pre-paid payment instruments in the country after obtaining necessary approval from Reserve Bank of India and operating within the guidelines issued by Reserve Bank of India.

AUTOMATIC TELLER MACHINE

RBI permitted banks to set up ATMs as extended delivery channels to spread banking services in the country. ATMs were initially deployed to expand banking services in urban areas but gradually there was also an increase in the usage of ATMs in rural and semi urban areas to provide a variety of banking transactions but the main utility of ATMs was for withdrawal of cash and enquiry of the balance. To increase the growth of ATMs in rural areas, RBI reviewed the extant policy on ATMs and it was decided to ensure fair pricing and enhanced access of the ATMs which has already gained prominence as a delivery channel for banking transactions in India. India has an ATM density of 14.8 km and branch density of 0.04 only (Bench Marking Indian Payment System, RBI Report, 2020). As per RBI report, about 58 percent of ATMs were deployed by public sector banks followed by 31 per cent by private sector banks and 10 per cent of white label ATMs.

Table: 1.7
Population-wise growth of ATMs in India

Year	**Rural areas**	**% share**	**Semi-Urban areas**	**%age**	**Urban areas**	**% share**	**Metropolitan areas**	**% share**	**Total**
2010	5196	8.64	14478	24.07	19763	32.85	20716	34.44	60153
2015	34158	18.06	50952	26.95	52379	27.70	51604	27.29	189093
2019	33645	19.87	44051	26.02	41413	24.46	50210	29.65	169319
EGR	18.68		11.13		7.40		8.85		10.35
Average	24980		40412.3		43887.5		45298.8		154578.6
SD	14266.36		16298.846		13690.645		13072.393		56606.03
CV	15.44		32.87		47.72		41.26		35.53

Source: (Various Branch Banking Statistics, RBI)

In 2019, 19.87 per cent of the total ATMs were deployed in rural areas as compared to 8.64 per cent in 2010 showing the growth rate of 18.68 percent. The growth rate in ATMs was lowest in metro cities and rural areas. The variation was highest in metro cities (C.V=41.26) and lowest was recorded in rural areas (C.V=15.44).

Further, in the budget 2010-2011, it was proposed that the villages which had population of less than 2000 would be covered by banking facilities. Thus, micro ATMs emerged as a device which was used by business correspondents to deliver basic banking services. Micro ATMs were available to every BC through a mobile phone connection. The first bank which started this ATM service was IDFC and there were 33.50 million transactions worth Rs 9000 crore done through these Micro ATMs in March 2020.

Keeping various operational problems in view, the banking sector introduced solar ATMs in India and the first solar ATM was launched in Mumbai in the year 2009 by Industrail Bank Ltd. From its inception till March 2020, India has had 100 solar power ATMs across the country and has generated 232131 KWh of solar energy through solar ATMs (RBI Report, 2019-2020). Further, to deepen the ATMs infrastructure in the country, especially in Tier III to Tier VI centers, non-banking companies were also permitted by RBI to set up and operate white labeled ATMs in India. This initiative was undertaken to increase the availability of access points for expansion of banking in rural areas. Further, the concept of micro ATMs was introduced in 2010-11. This helped the BCs to conduct the banking transactions in the villages which have a population of less than 2000. Another alternative delivery channel was the introduction of kiosk machines. Rural kiosks typically offer a broad range of services and applications specialized for rural areas. There are as many as 150 rural PC kiosk projects across India. Rural PC kiosks are a manifestation of various attempts to apply information and communication technology for socio-economic development. Early evidence indicates that rural kiosks can help villagers improve their economic standard of living by expanding livelihood options and empowering them with information, tools, goods, and services (such as education and healthcare).

PAYMENT BANKS AND SMALL FINANCE BANKS

Payment Banks has emerged as a new model of banks conceptualized by RBI to further strengthen the banking, in the rural areas. These banks mainly focused on low-income groups and small businesses. As on March 2020, six small finance banks commenced their operations. Small finance banks catered the fundamental financial services in rural and unserved sector of the economy (Rajan, 2016). According to the RBI guidelines issued in November 2014, the objective of a small finance bank is to boost financial inclusion by offering credit to small and business units, micro and medium enterprises.

CHALLENGES

1. Digital illiteracy: People in rural areas are less aware of digital banking channels as they lack in the basic knowledge of operating digital banking channels. Moreover, the internet connection in rural areas is poor which makes the scenario worst for rural customers to adopt digital banking technology.

2. Financial literacy: The major problem faced by customers was the Poor usage of banking services in villages due to less financial literacy. Lack of education as well as financial illiteracy prohibits them in accessing banking services. Further lack of technological awareness for availing banking services was significantly low and there is reluctance because of low technological literacy.

3. Less trust in digital banking: Due to more chances of fraud in digital payments, people in rural areas have less trust and confidence in digital payment system and more trust in the physical presence of bank branches as they give them more financial protection. There is much complexity in the usage of digital banking services so various training programs should be organized by banks to encourage their customers in rural areas to do digital payments.

4. High cost: In rural areas, the affordability of digital payment systems to the financially excluded people is also a concern. Banks need to hold technology to create efficient systems and processes to reduce transaction costs so that the banking products can be accepted and accessed by a greater number of people creating volume.

5. Unavailability of proper electricity and Internet access: The majority of people in rural areas are unable to adopt digital banking technology due to lack of power supply. Moreover, internet access is not proper in rural areas as there are less number of internet providers in rural areas.

6. Lack of trained staff and adoption of local language: Lack of trained staff also acted as a hindrance in motivating customers in rural areas to approach and access digital banking facilities. Though various policy initiatives have been taken up by the banks in order to simplify digital banking but still people in rural areas find it difficult to understand because of language barriers. This is mainly because most of the people residing in rural areas are illiterate. For this, banks should use local language in digital banking modes.

7. Nature of rural economy: In the rural areas, while addressing the digital banking requirements, customer encounter problems like lack of understanding of various terms and conditions related to digital payments, hidden costs etc. Thus, the introduction of digital payment system is a very daunting task.

8. Lack of awareness regarding branchless banking: The most important factor is the lack of awareness regarding branchless banking, which has emerged as an alternate delivery channel. Similarly, another problem in rural areas was lack of awareness about the banking products and services. Banking customers in rural areas were not fully aware about traditional and innovative deposit and loan products like BSBD account, rural apps, WLAs etc.

SUGGESTIONS

1. Technology has helped us to avail banking services from anywhere and anytime. However, technology should be simplified and made customer friendly so that people in the rural areas are encouraged to use digital banking services in an easy manner. Technology for banking services should be readily available to the people in rural areas as only then they will be encouraged to use it time and again.

2. People in rural areas are not much aware about the significance of various banking products. For this reason, it is very important to educate rural people about various banking products and services in rural areas. Moreover, awareness should be created regarding BCs/BFs model so as to build up confidence of rural customers.

3. The existing alternative delivery channels should be used to the maximum extent so that there should be more penetration of banking in rural areas.

4. For banks, opening a brick-and-mortar type branch in rural areas may not be financially and operationally viable because of many constraints. Therefore, they need to scout for innovative models to increase the number of rural customers.

5. There is a need to develop a proper banking culture among people in rural areas and they should be motivated to do more banking transactions. In addition, banks should adopt usage of local language in bank branches and in digital banking modes.

CONCLUSION

Indian banking system has undergone a paradigm shift from brick-and-mortar model to branchless banking. Banking has started adopting rapid influx of technology as a result there has been growth in various alternate modes to access basic banking services in rural areas.

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