ECONOMICS

Institutional and Digital Market Linkages for SHG Enterprises in India: Opportunities, Challenges and Implications for Economic Sustainability

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Published November 2026

Abstract

Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have become an important instrument for promoting women's economic participation, financial inclusion and rural entrepreneurship in India. Over the years, institutional credit and livelihood support have enabled many SHGs to move beyond savings and lending activities towards small-scale enterprises. However, the ability of these enterprises to sustain their activities increasingly depends on their access to wider markets, effective marketing arrangements and the capacity to adapt to emerging digital opportunities.

Against this background, the present study examines the role of institutional and digital market linkages in strengthening the economic performance of SHG enterprises in India. It draws entirely on secondary information obtained from NABARD, the Ministry of Rural Development, DAY-NRLM, government publications and relevant academic studies. Particular attention is given to marketing initiatives such as SARAS Melas, e-SARAS, the Government e-Marketplace (GeM), and partnerships with commercial e-commerce platforms.

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical approach to examine the relationship between market access, institutional support and enterprise development. The available evidence suggests that government-supported marketing initiatives have created new opportunities for SHG products by improving their visibility and extending their geographical reach. Nevertheless, several constraints continue to affect their commercial potential, including inadequate branding, inconsistent product quality, transportation costs, limited digital capabilities and competition from established businesses. The study argues that access to institutional finance, although essential, is not sufficient to ensure the long-term viability of SHG enterprises. Sustainable enterprise development also requires reliable market connections, appropriate technological support and coordinated institutional interventions. Strengthening these linkages can help transform SHG activities from small-scale livelihood initiatives into more competitive and commercially sustainable rural enterprises.

Keywords: digital marketing; institutional linkages; market integration; rural enterprise development; self-help groups; women entrepreneurship

1 Introduction

Self-Help Groups have gradually become an important part of India's rural development framework, particularly in creating livelihood opportunities and encouraging women's participation in economic activities. These groups generally bring together women from economically weaker sections of society who collectively undertake savings, internal lending and income-generating activities. What initially began as a community-based approach to financial inclusion has gradually developed into a broader platform for entrepreneurship and livelihood promotion. Many SHGs are now engaged in

activities such as food processing, handicrafts, handloom production, tailoring, agricultural processing and other non-farm enterprises. These activities have created opportunities for women to utilise their traditional skills, generate additional household income and participate more actively in local economic activities.

The expansion of the Self-Help Group–Bank Linkage Programme and the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana–National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM) has played an important role in this development. Through institutional credit, training and community-based support, these programmes have strengthened the financial and organisational foundations of SHGs. However, access to finance alone cannot ensure that a rural enterprise becomes economically successful. Its continued growth depends equally on the availability of customers, market information, suitable pricing arrangements and dependable distribution channels. One of the difficulties faced by many SHG enterprises is their limited connection with organised markets. A considerable number of these enterprises continue to depend on village markets, local traders, exhibitions and occasional sales events. Although these arrangements provide initial opportunities to sell products, they may not generate sufficient and consistent demand to support business expansion. Limited knowledge of branding, packaging, product presentation and consumer preferences further reduces their ability to compete with established businesses.

Recognising these limitations, government institutions have increasingly emphasised the need to strengthen the marketing capabilities of SHGs. Initiatives such as SARAS Melas, e-SARAS, SARAS Aajeevika Stores and partnerships with commercial e-commerce platforms are intended to provide rural producers with access to a wider consumer base. The growing importance of GeM and the Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC) also reflects an effort to connect small producers with emerging institutional and digital marketplaces. Digital commerce offers considerable opportunities to rural enterprises by reducing geographical barriers and allowing products to reach consumers outside their immediate localities. However, participation in digital markets involves more than registering products on an online platform. Enterprises must also be capable of managing digital catalogues, product photography, online orders, inventory, packaging, payments and delivery arrangements. Without these supporting capabilities, access to digital platforms may not translate into meaningful commercial benefits. The scale of institutional financial support highlights the importance of understanding this issue. According to the Ministry of Rural Development's Annual Report 2023–24, banks disbursed more than ₹2.07 lakh crore to SHGs during the financial year. Similarly, NABARD's Impact Report 2023–24 records that 1,435 SHGs, Joint Liability Groups and Producer Organisations participated in 78 programmes relating to digital marketplace onboarding, with 387 groups successfully integrated with e-commerce platforms. These developments indicate that institutional support for SHGs is gradually expanding from financial inclusion towards market-oriented enterprise development. Nevertheless, an important question remains: to what extent do these institutional and digital linkages contribute to the actual economic performance and sustainability of SHG enterprises?

The present study addresses this question by examining the development of institutional marketing arrangements and digital market connections in India. Rather than limiting the discussion to credit availability and group formation, it focuses on the wider economic conditions required for SHG enterprises to improve their market presence, competitiveness and long-term viability.

2 Review of literature

The development of SHGs in India has attracted considerable academic attention, particularly in relation to microfinance, poverty reduction, women's empowerment and financial inclusion. Over time, researchers have also begun to examine the entrepreneurial potential of SHGs and the factors that influence the sustainability of their economic activities.

Puhazhendi and Satyasai (2000), in their study *Microfinance for Rural People: An Impact Evaluation*, examined the economic and social implications of microfinance interventions among rural households. Their findings indicated improvements in household income and economic conditions among participating households. The study established the developmental significance of SHGs and microfinance institutions. However, its emphasis was primarily on household-level outcomes rather than the marketing and commercial performance of enterprises established by SHG members.

Garikipati (2008) explored the relationship between lending to women, household vulnerability and women's empowerment in rural India. The study highlighted that providing credit to women does not necessarily ensure their independent control over productive resources. This observation is relevant to enterprise development because access to finance must be accompanied by greater decision-making authority and control over business income if women are to benefit fully from entrepreneurial activities.

Swain and Wallentin (2009) examined whether participation in microfinance programmes contributed to women's empowerment. Their research highlighted the role of SHGs in improving women's agency, confidence and participation in household decision-making. While these findings demonstrate the wider social significance of SHGs, they also indicate the need to examine whether improvements in empowerment are accompanied by sustainable economic opportunities.

Deininger and Liu (2013), in their research on the economic and social impacts of an innovative SHG model in India, identified positive changes in certain dimensions of women's empowerment, nutritional intake and income diversification. However, the effects were not equally visible across all economic indicators. Their findings suggest that participation in SHGs should not automatically be considered evidence of sustained enterprise growth or improved financial performance.

Salwa and Ramanan (2017) developed a sustainable strategic marketing model for SHGs using an analytical hierarchical approach. Their research emphasised the importance of financing, branding, product positioning, promotional activities and production-related decisions. Their work is particularly relevant to the present study because it recognises marketing management as an important factor in the long-term sustainability of SHG enterprises.

More recently et al. (2025), in their exploratory study of marketing strategies adopted by women SHGs in rural India, examined the marketing practices and outreach of SHG-based activities in Tripura. Their research draws attention to differences in marketing capabilities among groups and the need for more effective marketing strategies to improve their commercial opportunities.

Institutional publications have also contributed to the understanding of this emerging area. NABARD's Impact Report 2023–24 provides information on digital marketplace training and the onboarding of rural producer groups onto e-commerce platforms. Similarly, the Ministry of Rural Development has promoted e-SARAS and partnerships with digital commerce platforms to improve the market access of SHG products.

2.1 Research gap

The existing literature provides considerable evidence on the contribution of SHGs to financial inclusion, poverty reduction and women's empowerment. However, the relationship between market integration and the commercial performance of SHG enterprises has received comparatively less attention.

Three important gaps emerge from the review.

First, much of the earlier research concentrates on credit access, savings and social empowerment. The extent to which wider market access contributes to enterprise-level outcomes such as sales, profitability and business continuity requires greater attention.

Second, institutional marketing initiatives and digital commerce are frequently examined as separate areas of intervention. Their combined contribution to improving the commercial opportunities of SHG enterprises needs to be understood within a common analytical framework.

Third, the availability of digital platforms does not necessarily result in improved economic performance. Factors such as product quality, logistics, pricing, digital literacy and the ability to meet consumer demand influence whether market access can be converted into actual business growth.

The present study attempts to address these gaps by examining institutional and digital market linkages as complementary elements of SHG enterprise development in India.

3 Objectives of the study

- To examine the development of institutional and digital market linkages available to SHG enterprises in India.
- To analyse the contribution of government-supported marketing initiatives towards expanding the market access of SHG products.
- To examine the role of e-commerce and digital platforms in connecting SHG enterprises with wider consumer markets.
- To analyse the relationship between market access, institutional support and the economic performance of SHG enterprises using available secondary indicators.
- To identify the major constraints affecting the commercial sustainability and competitiveness of SHG enterprises.
- To suggest appropriate policy measures for strengthening institutional and digital market integration.

4 Research methodology

The study follows a descriptive and analytical research design based entirely on secondary data. It examines the institutional arrangements, government initiatives and digital marketing opportunities developed to support SHG enterprises in India.

4.1 Sources of data

The information used in the study has been collected from the following sources:

- National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD).
- Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India.

- Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana–National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM).
- Press Information Bureau (PIB).
- Economic Survey of India.
- Government reports relating to digital commerce and rural entrepreneurship.
- Relevant academic journals, research papers and published studies.

4.2 Analytical approach

The study examines selected indicators relating to SHG mobilisation, institutional credit, digital marketplace participation, marketing initiatives and enterprise support. These indicators are used to understand the development of the institutional and digital marketing environment for SHG enterprises. The analysis is primarily qualitative and descriptive. It identifies emerging trends and examines how different forms of institutional support may influence market access and enterprise development.

4.3 Limitations of the study

Since the study relies entirely on secondary information, it does not independently measure the profitability or income changes of individual SHG enterprises. Further, the available institutional reports use different reporting periods and indicators, which limits direct comparisons across programmes.

Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as an assessment of the emerging market-linkage ecosystem rather than as a causal measurement of the impact of digital market participation on enterprise profitability.

5 Findings and discussion

The analysis of institutional publications and available research indicates that the market environment for SHG enterprises in India is gradually changing. Financial support continues to provide the foundation for enterprise development, while institutional marketing initiatives and digital platforms are creating additional opportunities for reaching consumers.

5.1 Expansion of institutional marketing opportunities

Institutional marketing initiatives have become increasingly important in connecting SHG producers with organised consumer markets. SARAS Melas, state-level exhibitions, dedicated retail outlets and government-supported promotional activities provide opportunities for rural entrepreneurs to display their products and interact directly with customers. For many small SHG enterprises, entering organised markets independently can be difficult because of limited financial resources, inadequate promotional capabilities and the absence of established distribution networks. Government-supported marketing arrangements can reduce some of these entry barriers by providing exhibition space, promotional support and opportunities for direct selling. The initiatives undertaken under DAY-NRLM also reflect a growing recognition that livelihood promotion must extend beyond production activities. Support for product development, collective branding and market promotion can help SHG enterprises establish a more consistent presence in the marketplace. However, participation in exhibitions should not be confused with permanent market integration. While such events may generate immediate sales and improve product visibility, sustainable enterprise development requires regular customers, repeat orders and dependable distribution arrangements.

Table 1. Institutional and digital market-linkage initiatives for SHG enterprises in India.

Sl. No.	Programme	Indicator	Reported figure	Reference period
1	DAY-NRLM	Rural women mobilised into SHGs	10.05 crore	Feb-25
2	DAY-NRLM	SHGs formed	90.90 lakh	Feb-25
3	e-SARAS	Products listed	1,400+	Jul-26
4	e-SARAS/ONDC	Buyer applications integrated	11+	2026
5	SARAS Melas	Annual marketing events	Around 50	2026 report
6	SARAS Melas	National events organised	117	Cumulative
7	SARAS Melas	Annual sales	More than ₹200 crore	Government-reported figure
8	SVEP	Enterprises supported	3.13 lakh	Economic Survey 2024–25
9	Lakhpati Didi Initiative	Annual household income benchmark	At least ₹1 lakh	Programme definition
10	Lakhpati Didi Initiative	Programme target	6 crore women	Vision for 2029

Source: Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India; Press Information Bureau; Economic Survey 2024–25.

The figures presented in Table 1 demonstrate the expanding institutional ecosystem supporting SHG enterprises. The scale of mobilisation indicates the importance of SHGs in India's rural livelihood framework, while the development of dedicated marketing initiatives reflects a gradual shift towards enterprise-oriented support. Nevertheless, the number of SHGs formed or products listed cannot independently establish commercial success. Greater attention must be given to actual sales, profitability and the continuity of enterprise activities.

5.2 Digital platforms and emerging market opportunities

The expansion of digital commerce has created new possibilities for rural enterprises, particularly those that previously depended on local customers and periodic exhibitions. Among the government-supported initiatives, e-SARAS represents an important effort to connect women-led producer groups with consumers across different geographical locations. The platform provides an online marketplace through which SHG products can be presented to a wider audience. Government efforts to develop partnerships with Amazon, Flipkart, Meesho and ONDC further indicate an attempt to connect rural producers with established digital commerce networks. According to the Press Information Bureau release dated 4 April 2025, e-SARAS had facilitated more than 34 lakh product sales and enabled the delivery of over 8,000 products across 30 States and Union Territories. These figures indicate the growing reach of digital marketing initiatives. They also demonstrate the potential of online platforms to improve product visibility and provide access to customers beyond traditional local markets.

Table 2. Digital market performance of e-SARAS.

Indicator	Reported figure
Product sales facilitated	More than 34 lakh

Indicator	Reported figure
Products delivered	Over 8,000
Geographical coverage	30 States and Union Territories
Reference date	04-Apr-25

Source: Press Information Bureau, Government of India, 4 April 2025.

However, digital market participation involves several operational requirements. Product photographs must be attractive and accurate, descriptions should clearly communicate product features, and pricing must remain competitive. Enterprises must also manage stock availability, online payments, packaging and timely delivery. For small SHG enterprises, these requirements can create difficulties because members may have limited experience in digital business operations. Consequently, the benefits of online market access depend on the availability of continuous training and institutional assistance. Digital platforms should therefore be viewed not merely as sales channels but as part of a wider business support system.

5.3 Institutional training and digital onboarding

The growing emphasis on digital market integration has increased the importance of training and institutional handholding. Rural entrepreneurs may possess valuable production skills but often require additional support to manage online business operations. NABARD's Impact Report 2023–24 provides useful evidence in this regard. During the financial year, 1,435 SHGs, Joint Liability Groups and Producer Organisations participated in 78 training programmes related to digital marketplace onboarding. Of these, 387 groups were successfully integrated with e-commerce platforms. NABARD also supported onboarding through e-commerce platforms, social media channels and ONDC. Its My Store initiative provided another online marketing opportunity for rural collectives and microentrepreneurs. An important observation emerges from these figures. Participation in training programmes and successful digital onboarding represent two different stages of enterprise development. Training may improve awareness and basic knowledge, but actual platform integration requires further assistance with product registration, digital cataloguing, pricing and order management. Therefore, institutional support should not end with the completion of a training programme. Regular guidance, technical assistance and access to digital service providers are necessary to ensure that SHG enterprises can use online marketplaces effectively.

5.4 Institutional finance as a foundation for market expansion

Access to finance remains an essential requirement for the growth of SHG enterprises. Even when producers receive opportunities to sell their products in wider markets, they must have sufficient working capital to purchase raw materials, maintain stocks, improve packaging and fulfil larger orders. The Ministry of Rural Development's Annual Report 2023–24 records that banks disbursed more than ₹2.07 lakh crore to SHGs during the financial year. NABARD's Annual Report 2023–24 also records approximately ₹2.09 lakh crore in loans disbursed under the SHG-Bank Linkage Programme. These figures demonstrate the substantial role played by formal financial institutions in supporting SHG-based economic activities. However, the availability of credit should not be considered an independent measure of enterprise success. A business may receive adequate finance and increase its production capacity, but without sufficient demand and effective marketing arrangements, the additional production may not generate the expected returns. This highlights the need to connect institutional credit with market opportunities. Financial assistance becomes more productive when

enterprises have access to reliable buyers, appropriate distribution channels and information about consumer demand. Thus, financial inclusion and market integration should be treated as complementary components of rural enterprise development.

5.5 Regional differences in market integration

The development of SHG enterprises is influenced by differences in regional infrastructure, institutional capacity, digital connectivity and market opportunities. These factors can affect the ability of rural producers to participate in organised marketing arrangements. NABARD's Status of Microfinance in India 2022–23 identifies regional variations in SHG savings and credit linkages, with southern and eastern regions accounting for substantial shares of credit uptake. Such variations are important because access to institutional finance can influence the capacity of SHG enterprises to invest in production, packaging and marketing. At the same time, regional differences in credit access should not be interpreted as direct evidence of differences in enterprise profitability. Market performance is also influenced by consumer demand, transportation facilities, the availability of buyers and the nature of products manufactured by SHGs.A more detailed state-wise assessment of sales, turnover, digital marketplace participation and enterprise survival would help establish these relationships more clearly.

5.6 Major marketing constraints affecting SHG enterprises

Despite the expansion of government-supported marketing arrangements, several difficulties continue to limit the commercial development of SHG enterprises. One major concern is the limited capacity to develop strong product brands. Many SHG products have distinctive regional characteristics and traditional value, but inadequate packaging and product presentation can make it difficult for them to compete in wider markets. Another difficulty relates to quality consistency. Small enterprises may find it challenging to maintain uniform product standards when production depends on household-level activities and locally available resources. Transportation and logistics also affect their competitiveness. The cost of collecting products from different locations, storing them and delivering them to customers can reduce profit margins, particularly for enterprises operating on a small scale. Digital capabilities present another important challenge. Although online marketplaces create opportunities for wider participation, some SHG members require additional support in product photography, digital payments, inventory management and customer communication.

The major constraints can be summarised as follows:

- Inadequate product branding, packaging and promotional capabilities.
- Limited information about consumer preferences and market demand.
- High transportation, storage and delivery costs.
- Difficulties in maintaining consistent product quality.
- Insufficient working capital for fulfilling larger orders.
- Limited digital marketing and business management skills.
- Competition from established commercial brands.
- Lack of regular buyers and dependable distribution networks.

These constraints indicate that providing access to an online marketplace or organising occasional exhibitions is not sufficient to ensure sustainable market participation. SHG enterprises require a

broader support system that combines product development, quality improvement, marketing assistance, logistics and financial services.

5.7 Market integration as a long-term enterprise development strategy

The overall findings suggest that SHG enterprise development needs to move gradually from a production-oriented approach towards a more market-oriented model of entrepreneurship. Institutional marketing initiatives can provide initial opportunities for product promotion, while digital platforms can extend geographical reach. Financial institutions can meet working capital requirements, and producer organisations can facilitate collective marketing and improve bargaining power. These forms of support are most effective when they operate together rather than independently. For example, an SHG enterprise that receives institutional credit and participates in digital marketing may still struggle if it cannot maintain product quality or fulfil orders on time. Similarly, participation in exhibitions may generate sales opportunities, but the absence of repeat customers can restrict business continuity. This suggests that the economic performance of SHG enterprises should be assessed through indicators that reflect actual commercial activity. These may include sales turnover, net income, repeat orders, customer retention, market diversification and enterprise survival. The number of groups formed, individuals trained or products listed remains useful for measuring programme outreach. However, such indicators should be complemented by enterprise-level performance measures to understand whether institutional interventions are generating lasting economic benefits.

6 Conclusion

Self-Help Groups have gradually developed from community-based savings and credit institutions into important platforms for rural livelihood promotion and women's entrepreneurship in India. Their contribution to financial inclusion and economic participation is well recognised. However, the long-term sustainability of enterprises established by SHG members increasingly depends on their ability to establish reliable connections with wider markets. The present study highlights the growing importance of institutional and digital market linkages in this process. Government-supported initiatives such as SARAS Melas, e-SARAS, retail outlets and partnerships with e-commerce platforms have created additional opportunities for SHG products to reach consumers beyond local markets. Similarly, NABARD's digital onboarding and capacity-building programmes indicate the increasing importance of institutional support in preparing rural enterprises for digital commerce. At the same time, the analysis shows that market access alone cannot guarantee commercial success. Product quality, branding, packaging, pricing, logistics, working capital and digital capabilities continue to influence the ability of SHG enterprises to compete effectively. One of the central observations of the study is that financial support and market integration need to develop together. Institutional credit can strengthen production capacity, but the availability of regular customers and dependable marketing channels determines whether production can be converted into sustainable commercial returns. The policy approach towards SHGs should therefore gradually extend beyond group formation and financial inclusion towards the development of viable and competitive enterprises. This requires coordinated support in areas such as product development, collective branding, quality certification, digital marketing, institutional procurement and distribution infrastructure. Greater emphasis should also be placed on monitoring the actual economic outcomes of market-linkage programmes. Indicators such as sales turnover, profitability, repeat orders, market reach and

enterprise survival can provide a clearer understanding of whether these interventions are improving the economic position of SHG entrepreneurs.

The study concludes that effective market integration is an important condition for transforming SHG activities from small-scale livelihood initiatives into sustainable rural enterprises. A stronger connection between institutional finance, organised marketing channels and digital commerce can contribute to rural economic diversification, employment generation and women's economic independence in India.

7 Policy recommendations

Based on the findings, the following measures may help strengthen the market integration and commercial sustainability of SHG enterprises.

1. **Strengthening rural marketing infrastructure:** Common marketing facilities, storage centres, packaging units and distribution networks should be developed to reduce operational difficulties faced by small SHG enterprises. Such facilities can also help improve product handling and delivery efficiency.
2. **Promoting collective branding and quality standards:** SHG enterprises should be encouraged to develop common brands, improve product presentation and adopt appropriate quality standards. Collective branding can help individual producers benefit from greater market recognition and consumer confidence.
3. **Expanding digital marketing capabilities:** Training should extend beyond basic digital literacy to include practical knowledge of online cataloguing, product photography, digital payments, inventory management, order processing and customer communication. Continuous technical assistance is particularly important for enterprises entering digital marketplaces for the first time.
4. **Improving institutional buyer linkages:** Greater efforts should be made to connect SHG enterprises with institutional procurement opportunities through GeM, ONDC and other suitable marketing arrangements. This can help create more dependable demand for products manufactured by rural producer groups.
5. **Strengthening working capital support:** Financial institutions should consider the specific working capital requirements of SHG enterprises that receive larger orders or seek to expand production. Timely access to finance can help enterprises purchase raw materials, maintain inventories and meet delivery commitments.
6. **Introducing enterprise-level performance monitoring:** Monitoring systems should move beyond recording the number of SHGs formed or individuals trained. Regular information on sales, turnover, profitability, repeat orders, market coverage and enterprise survival would provide a better assessment of programme effectiveness.
7. **Developing regional enterprise clusters:** Product-specific clusters should be encouraged to promote collective production, shared facilities, common branding and coordinated marketing. Such arrangements can improve economies of scale and strengthen the bargaining position of SHG producers.
8. **Strengthening institutional coordination:** NABARD, DAY-NRLM, state rural livelihood missions, banks, producer organisations and digital commerce platforms should work more closely to provide integrated support. Better coordination can reduce the gap between financial assistance, production support and actual market opportunities.

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