



Rural India Is Ready For AI, But Is AI?

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Executive Summary



India's digital landscape is expanding rapidly. National surveys suggest that internet access has grown to unprecedented levels¹, with rural users and women driving much of this growth. These numbers project a story of deepening digital inclusion.

Fieldwork with Video Volunteers' Community Content Creators (CCs) across six states, and a two-day training workshop with young women at Telangana Tribal Welfare Residential Degree College (Girls) (TTWRDC(G), in Mahabubabad district, shows that access does not automatically translate into meaningful or empowering use. Students, many of whom were first-generation college learners from marginalised households, struggled with shared devices, unstable connectivity, and near-zero prior knowledge of AI. Contradictory questionnaire responses and hesitant participation underscored how precarious digital literacy remains.

At the same time, the research demonstrates how quickly adoption can expand when structured support is provided. Within two days, students advanced from using AI for exam-style queries to asking contextual questions about scholarships, health, and careers, and even experimenting with creative outputs. CCs, meanwhile, are already integrating AI into their everyday work by using ChatGPT for scriptwriting, background research, and community advocacy, though they remain cautious about accuracy and accessibility.

¹Comprehensive Modular Survey: Telecom, 2025 | <https://hostwebs.site/8qOzBV>

The findings highlight three key insights:

- Brief, guided exposure can rapidly unlock applied AI use.
- AI is understood not as an abstract technology but as a practical tool for education, livelihoods, and rights.
- Structural barriers like connectivity, devices, literacy, and gendered norms remain the decisive obstacles.

The study concludes that India's AI transition must move beyond counting internet users. To make inclusion real, policies must prioritise vernacular and voice access, community-led digital training, and strategies that confront caste, class, and gender exclusions head-on.

Introduction



India's Digital Moment

At first glance, the global narrative suggests that we now live in a seamlessly connected digital world. Headlines regularly celebrate rising internet penetration, expanding smartphone ownership, and the rapid spread of AI-enabled applications. These broad indicators create an impression that digital access is deepening uniformly across regions, social groups, and geographies, and that technology is steadily closing longstanding divides.

Yet, the everyday realities of rural and marginalised communities reveal digital interactions remain shaped by unstable connectivity, irregular device availability, gendered mobility restrictions, and limited familiarity with new technologies. As a result, the notion of universal digital participation becomes far less certain when examined from the ground up.

Nation-wide studies such as the [IAMAI-Kantar 2024 report](#), present rising internet usage figures, but obscure the realities revealed by recent field studies. [A 2025 study by Hemanta Kumar Doloj](#) from rural Assam, for instance, found that while 75% of households reported mobile service availability, only 19% had functional internet access and barely 9% rated its quality as satisfactory. Similarly, [another 2024 study by Sindakis and Showkat](#) analyses rural technology adoption underscores how affordability, last-mile infrastructure, linguistic barriers, and limited digital literacy continue to constrain participation despite significant policy investments.

These constraints are especially pronounced for women, as they mostly depend on shared household phones, lack

personal ownership and therefore control over being online. Hence, statistical inclusion masks uneven forms of access defined by class, caste, gender norms, and weak digital literacy. This study is designed precisely to interrogate this gap between statistical inclusion and lived experience.

Why This Study

AI is widely described as India's "next revolution," however the stories of ordinary rural citizens, especially those from marginalized communities, discover and use AI, remain missing. By exploring this, the study aims to discover agency experienced in practice.

Our Objectives & Guiding Questions

This exploratory study sought to:

- Document grassroots adoption and everyday patterns of AI use.
- Evaluate whether voice prompts and vernacular inputs reduce barriers.
- Identify real-life use cases across education, health, livelihoods, governance, and community storytelling.
- Test whether brief, structured training increases productive use.
- Map structural and social barriers that shape adoption.

Guiding questions included:

- How and why are rural Indians engaging with AI tools?
- What infrastructural and socio-cultural factors enable or hinder adoption?
- Do voice and vernacular access significantly improve usability?
- For what meaningful purposes are AI tools being applied? Does this improve the access of schemes, health, jobs and education?
- How difficult is it for first-time users to set up and interact with applications like ChatGPT?

Existing Narratives vs Ground Realities

Most literature on AI in India highlights institutional adoption such as government pilots in health, corporate projects in agriculture, or NGO-led education initiatives^{2 3 4 5}. Such accounts reinforce a top-down view of digital development, casting rural citizens as passive beneficiaries.

Our fieldwork challenges the assumption that rural users are already beneficiaries of the AI revolution. The Use Cases section provides this evidence, highlighting how rural communities are already experimenting with AI in ways that are absent from existing reports.

² Educational Initiatives (Ei) - Mindspark Program

³ Wadhvani AI Learning

⁴ PadhAI App and BaalSakhi by Pratham Foundation

⁵ Shishu Maapan by Wadhvani AI

Approach & Field Sites

The study adopted a qualitative, mixed-method approach with an ethnographic orientation. The aim was less to measure access statistically than to observe how rural individuals actually begin to engage with AI in their own contexts.

Throughout this study, references to 'AI' focus specifically on generative AI tools, with ChatGPT as the primary interface of analysis. ChatGPT currently has the largest global user base among publicly accessible AI applications, making it the most relevant tool for examining emerging patterns of everyday use in rural contexts.

Two complementary field sites were chosen:

- **Community Content Creators (CCs) and Mentors:** Video Volunteers (VV) is a community media organisation that trains and supports rural citizens to produce community-led journalism on issues of rights, governance, and livelihoods. The individuals known as Community Content Creators (CCs) are embedded media practitioners working in their own villages, documenting local concerns through video and digital storytelling. Mentors in this network are senior CCs who guide newer members in reporting, scripting, and community engagement. This embedded structure positions CCs as early and informed experimenters with digital tools, making them a relevant entry point for examining emerging AI usage in rural contexts. Ten CCs and mentors across six states were interviewed over calls of approximately 20 minutes in length about their use of AI in community journalism and daily life. As grassroots media practitioners, they offered insight into how AI is being integrated into rural advocacy and content creation.



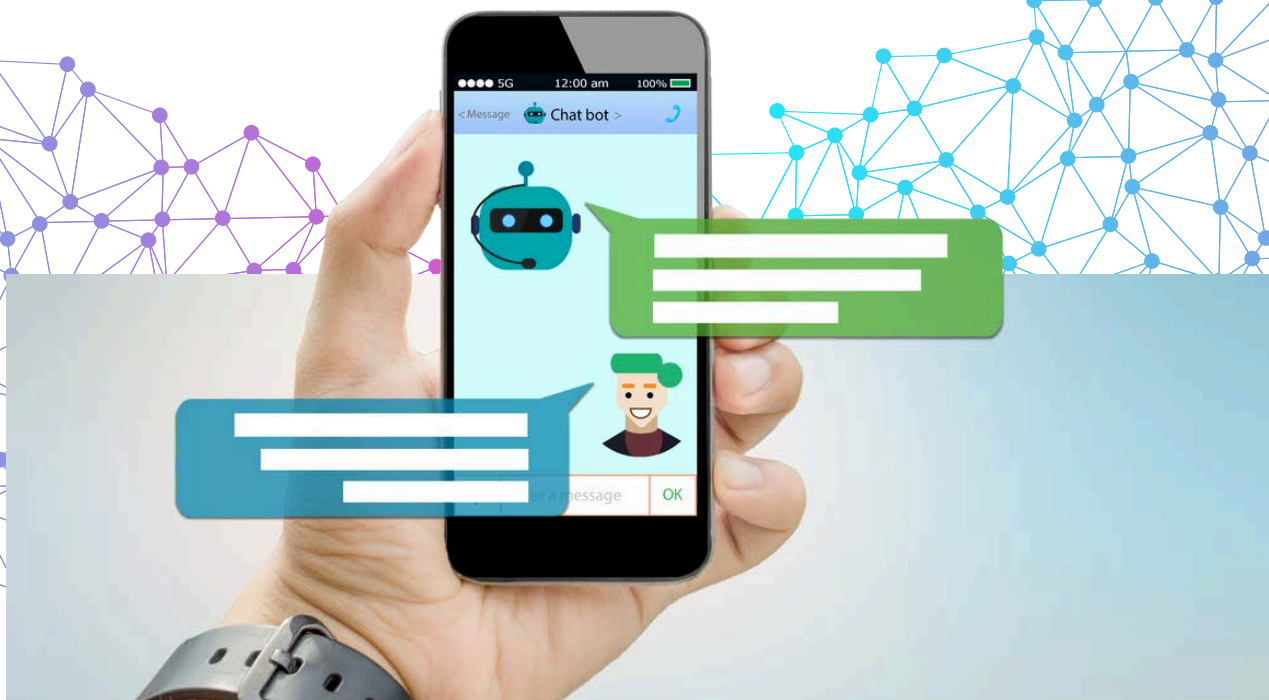
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- **TTWRDC(G) Workshop:** TTWRDC(G) is a state-run residential degree college serving first generation young women learners from tribal and marginalised communities, from low-income rural households. As a residential institution where mobile phone use is restricted, the site offered a clear window into how first-time users encounter AI under conditions of limited and irregular digital exposure.

A two-day workshop with 37 students at Telangana Tribal Welfare Residential Degree College for Girls in Mahabubabad involved questionnaires, hands-on use of ChatGPT, and group presentations by mostly first-generation learners from low-income households.

This dual design captured both ends of the spectrum, from CCs experimenting with AI in their work to students encountering it for the first time. The study is exploratory and small in scale, aiming not to generalise but to surface grounded insights into barriers and possibilities for inclusive AI adoption in rural contexts.

Our Findings



The study sites spanned both practitioners already using AI in their work and first-generation learners just beginning their digital journeys. This allowed us to examine AI's potential through community intermediaries alongside the barriers faced by new users in rural and marginalised contexts.

Insights from the Mentors and CCs

Conversations with ten CCs and mentors reveal that AI, particularly ChatGPT, is beginning to enter the workflows of rural media practitioners. For most, adoption is still experimental, but it is already reshaping how they approach storytelling, research, and community engagement.

Nearly all participants had used ChatGPT in some form with script writing being the most common application. CCs described drafting an initial version of a script in their own words, then using ChatGPT to refine structure, improve language, and add impactful lines. This allowed them to produce more professional and confident outputs without losing authenticity. Several CCs also relied on ChatGPT for background research on government schemes, legal provisions, and social policies, replacing what had earlier required lengthy searches across scattered sources.

ChatGPT was also used to draft formal letters such as police complaints and applications to Panchayat offices and government schemes. Mentors highlighted this as especially



significant in contexts where villagers often depend on intermediaries or pay middlemen for such tasks, positioning AI as a low-cost tool with the potential to democratise access to bureaucratic processes.

The conversations also revealed clear preferences in how CCs interact with AI. For instance, Mamta, a senior mentor says, *When I don't know something, I type the question and get the answer. But I have noticed that if you ask the same question in a different way, you get different types of scripts. If I don't like the first script, I rephrase the question with the same meaning but different wording, and then ChatGPT gives a different script. I select two or four lines that I like.*



Soria Banu, a CC from West Bengal says *For example, if I ask for a documentary script, for that the whole video has to be shot, so it doesn't give as good results in tone and voice. So I break down my work into smaller parts and ask ChatGPT, then it only gives one part, so I ask accordingly, as many times as needed. Suppose I'm making something on trafficking, so to correct that I write something myself, then I attach that, then I prepare a list of what I need, I add a description, I upload that, so it prepares it and gives me that. If I already have some information, then I get the desired response quickly, so I do it accordingly.*

Most CCs preferred Hindi text prompts for ease of editing, while voice prompts were used sparingly due to accuracy and dialect issues. Participants valued ChatGPT for speed and clarity but stressed the need to verify outputs and noted its bookish tone and limited local specificity. AI was consistently framed as an assistant rather than a replacement, with concerns that over-reliance could reduce creativity. Instead, CCs preferred blending AI suggestions with local knowledge to keep community narratives grounded.

Adoption was uneven, with nine CCs using AI regularly and one using it rarely due to limitations in literacy, confidence, or access. Despite this, overall sentiment was optimistic. CCs saw AI as a way to enhance productivity, research capacity, and community advocacy, with several expressing interest in training others. These findings indicate that rural media practitioners are among the earliest independent adopters of AI in rural India, demonstrating cautious but meaningful grassroots appropriation when access, training, and contextual adaptation are in place.

Training Workshop at TTWRDC(G): Observations and Learnings

The second field site was a two-day AI training workshop with 37 students at Telangana Tribal Welfare Residential

Degree College for Girls in Mahabubabad. A pre-workshop questionnaire captured students' socio-economic background, digital access, and prior exposure to AI, revealing largely shared or limited device access and minimal familiarity with tools like ChatGPT, highlighting the need for guided, contextual training.

Most participants were first-generation college learners from low-income households, many from Scheduled Tribe communities, with annual incomes ranging from Below Poverty Line levels to around ₹1 lakh, shaping both their digital access and expectations from technology.

Only a handful had even heard of ChatGPT before, and none had used it independently. The pre-workshop questionnaires reflected this gap. Some students initially claimed familiarity with AI but later confused it with Google or YouTube. Others repeated back examples mentioned by facilitators. Such contradictory responses highlighted how new AI was to them, and how digital literacy is still contextually unequal.

Students also reported forgotten email passwords, shared use of family phones, and reliance on unstable networks. In this context, simply logging into ChatGPT was itself a milestone. Once access was secured, however, curiosity quickly took over.

These observations mirror national and field-level evidence that access counted on paper rarely reflects actual usability: for instance, IMAI-Kantar data on rising user numbers sit uneasily beside studies showing extremely low household-level internet quality, such as Doloji's finding that only 9% of rural respondents reported satisfactory connectivity.

Day 1: First Encounters

On day 1, the 37 students divided themselves into groups and each group of students shared a single computer, with three to five participants working together at one terminal due to limited availability of devices. This arrangement encouraged collective decision-making on what prompts to try, but also meant that not everyone could type directly. The groups were asked to experiment with prompts freely and enter any questions or topics of interest on their own. Students began with exam-style prompts like requests for essays, definitions of concepts, and summaries of textbook topics. Early queries mirrored classroom habits, but soon expanded to career options, higher education, and everyday curiosities once the tool felt approachable. This shift shows how initial use, shaped by schooling, quickly broadened into social and aspirational domains.

Day 2: Guided Exploration

On the second day, students were guided toward contextual, real-life uses of AI. Instead of abstract questions, they generated scholarship letters, health and nutrition tips, and career advice tailored to their backgrounds. When asked to query scholarships for SC, ST, and OBC students in Telangana, they adapted a model prompt with details about their course, caste category, and college. Despite unpolished phrasing, this shift from generic to personalised queries marked a key step in seeing AI as relevant to their own lives.

Unguided practice and group work pushed students toward more personal use. Topics ranged from women's health and motivation letters to everyday health queries, with prompts reflecting concerns they might hesitate to raise elsewhere. In these moments, AI functioned less as an academic tool and more as a low-risk, private space for seeking information.

In the final exercise, students drafted letters to the makers of ChatGPT, using the tool mainly to refine language and reflect on their two-day experience. While many relied on AI to generate the text, the exercise revealed curiosity and excitement, as well as an early sense of belonging to a wider technological world. For young women from marginalised backgrounds, suddenly being able to access a vast body of information and communicate it in polished English was experienced as empowering. As one participant put it: *"This is even better than Google."*

Reflections

The workshop showed that even brief exposure can shift students from hesitant, exam-focused use to confident experimentation. While barriers of access, language, and gender remain, the rapid learning curve points to the value of structured, context-sensitive training. For these young women, AI quickly became a practical tool for education, careers, health, and self-expression, underscoring both the precarity and promise of rural AI adoption.

What Do These Findings Mean To Us



The findings highlight common barriers and shared opportunities.

Access remains uncertain.

Though counted in National surveys as “internet users”, unstable internet, reliance on shared devices, and forgotten or unused email accounts made digital access a challenge.

Digital literacy is tentative and contradictory.

Students’ inconsistent questionnaire responses and CCs’ cautious blending of AI outputs with their own drafts show that engagement is still at a learning stage. Contradictions and hesitations reflect the early, experimental phase of digital adoption.

Language is both a bridge and a barrier.

CCs favored Hindi text prompts because they were editable and more reliable than voice inputs. Students initially struggled with English phrasing but quickly began experimenting with their own unpolished sentences. These patterns confirm that vernacular access is essential for AI to be usable at scale in rural India.

Agency emerges with exposure.

Despite barriers, both groups demonstrated how quickly curiosity translates into applied use when given the chance. Structured exposure gave a sense of ownership and imagination.

Structural inequalities persist.

Factors like poverty, caste, gendered mobility restrictions and structural exclusion of marginalised communities shape digital participation. Without addressing them, rural AI adoption risks digital exclusion.

Some of the meaningful ways AI is helping Rural Communities



Much of the existing reports, like on AI in rural India, stops at measuring internet penetration or counting how many people are online. This numbers-driven approach is also visible in recent telecom datasets. For instance, TRAI's latest [Quarterly Performance Indicators Report \(December 2025\)](#), assesses digital progress almost entirely through subscriber counts, broadband penetration rates, and rural-urban subscription splits, with no attention to digital literacy, device sharing, or meaningful use.

These numbers, while important, do not explain what rural citizens actually do with AI or how they use it in ways that matter for their lives. Our study adds evidence of meaningful use, showing how students, CCs, and their communities are beginning to use AI for learning, navigating systems, self-expression, and strengthening community voice.

The first two use categories show how rural and marginalised communities are already using AI in concrete, agentic ways. The third highlights emerging and hoped-for uses, reflecting how participants imagine AI could empower their communities if barriers of access, literacy, and trust were reduced.

Observed Use Cases in Rural and Marginalised Contexts

- **Essays and textbook explanations** – Students used ChatGPT to draft essays, summaries, and explanations of textbook concepts, treating it as a digital tutor that could replicate and extend classroom learning.

- **Higher education and global opportunities** – Queries about MCA colleges, IELTS, and MBAs abroad reflected aspirations for upward mobility, with ChatGPT being positioned as a career counsellor.
- **Language improvement** – Prompts on how to speak or write English fluently positioned ChatGPT as a practice tool, allowing students to imagine AI as a coach for building communication skills.
- **Women's health** – Queries on PCOD and dietary advice for low blood underscored how AI became a private space for young women to access sensitive health information.
- **General health management** – Questions about remedies, nutrition, and everyday health practices highlighted how students experimented with AI as a source for routine health advice.
- **Scholarship searches** – Students sought information on SC, ST, and OBC scholarships in India and abroad, using ChatGPT to navigate complex systems.
- **Legal awareness** – Questions about domestic violence laws in Telangana suggested that AI was also being imagined as a resource for understanding rights and protections.
- **Employment opportunities** – Prompts asking for government job vacancies in their state reflected how AI was appropriated as a job-search assistant.
- **Career planning** – Queries about abroad universities, and IELTS preparation revealed how AI was imagined as a counsellor offering guidance on pathways rarely visible in their rural environments.
- **Agriculture and livelihoods** – Queries about crop choices, soil health, pesticide use, and environmental concerns showed how AI was tapped as an advisory tool, linking directly to the farming backgrounds of many students.
- **Content Creation** – A student used ChatGPT to create an image with graphics to thank the facilitator for the workshop.

Observed Use Cases in Rural Journalism and Community Media

- **Drafting story scripts** – CCs found that initial versions of video stories can now be generated in minutes with ChatGPT. This efficiency allows them to focus more on reporting and less on drafting.
- **Refining scripts** – Many CCs previously struggled to make their scripts presentable due to literacy barriers. With AI support, they now produce cleaner drafts and polished narratives.
- **Generating catchy and impactful lines** – Some CCs use ChatGPT to create striking lines or explore alternative story angles.

- **Quick background research** – ChatGPT is often used to obtain quick overviews of government schemes, laws, or social issues. CCs remain cautious, however, and double-check the information.
- **Simplifying complex material** – When faced with government schemes, policies, or technical issues they do not fully understand, CCs use ChatGPT to generate content in a documentation style that they can later adapt into accessible scripts.
- **Drafting voiceover scripts** – Some CCs have begun to use ChatGPT for preparing voiceovers, although scriptwriting remains the primary use.
- **Formal applications and complaints** – CCs and mentors have learned to draft letters for Panchayats and local authorities, helping communities avoid reliance on middlemen who often charge fees for this service.
- **Police complaints** – One mentor reported successfully drafting a police complaint with proper legal sections.
- **Procedural letters beyond video work** – CCs have extended AI use to drafting letters for routine procedural needs in their communities, broadening the tool's practical value.
- **Personal and social media use** – A few CCs also use ChatGPT for personal queries or social media content. Some even practice prompts daily, which, despite time constraints due to domestic responsibilities, helps build digital confidence and indirectly strengthens professional skills.

Way Forward



This study finds that emerging AI use in rural India is shaped less by novelty and more by necessity. Across young women college students and Community Content Creators (CCs), AI is being adopted to compensate for broken or absent public infrastructure, particularly in education, health, and governance. Students turned to AI for exam preparation, spoken English practice, and guidance on higher education or scholarships, areas where formal mentoring and institutional support were limited or unavailable. Similarly, both students and CCs explored AI to understand welfare schemes, legal rights, and administrative procedures, using it as a stand-in for frontline systems that are often inaccessible, opaque, or unevenly enforced in rural contexts.

Five interlinked themes emerge from these engagements. First, AI is being used for procedural clarity and system navigation, helping users break down complex processes into steps they can act on. Second, it provides discreet access to sensitive information, especially around reproductive health, mental health, or legal rights—domains where social stigma, gender norms, and fear of judgment constrain open inquiry. Third, AI functions as a space for informal learning and confidence-building, allowing users to rehearse questions, practice language, or refine ideas privately before taking action in public or bureaucratic settings. This low-stakes, iterative use is particularly significant for first-generation learners and young women, for whom asking questions publicly can carry social risk.

Fourth, among CCs especially, AI is emerging as a shared community resource rather than an individual productivity tool. CCs are already integrating AI into their journalism and advocacy workflows—drafting scripts, translating content,

preparing issue briefs, and imagining templates for petitions or campaigns in local languages. Fifth, these practices point to a broader pattern of community empowerment, where AI supports not only personal problem-solving but also collective action and voice. Taken together, these themes suggest that AI in rural and marginalised settings is evolving as a tool for sense-making, agency, and confidence, helping citizens navigate exclusionary systems and strengthen their participation in education, governance, livelihoods, and community media, rather than merely automating tasks or delivering efficiency gain

The findings also challenge the assumption that marginalised communities require prolonged hand-holding before they can meaningfully engage with AI. For AI builders, this presents a critical learning opportunity. If AI is to support democratic use rather than deepen exclusion, vernacular, voice-based, and low-bandwidth access cannot be treated as add-ons. More importantly, design and deployment must recognise and work with community-led practices and intermediaries that already operate in these contexts. The question is no longer whether marginalised users can adapt to AI, but whether AI systems are willing to adapt to them.



Video Volunteers is a global organization dedicated to advancing the right to voice. VV amplifies marginalized voices to ensure social change and policymaking are grounded in community-led, participatory insights from the ground up.

