GOLDEN RESEARCH THOUGHTS
ISSN: 2231-5063
IMPACT FACTOR : 4.6052(UIF)
VOLUME - 16 | ISSUE - 3 | SEPTEMBER– 2026

BEYOND SURVIVAL TO SCALE: PROSPECTS, CHALLENGES, AND THE FUTURE COURSE OF INDIA'S MSME SECTOR

Dr. Deepa Keshav Sandave

ABSTRACT

Micro, Small and Medium enterprises are one of the most vibrant and employment-intensive segments of the Indian economy. They play a vital role not just in terms of the output and employment they generate, but also as incubators of entrepreneurship, promoters of regional balance, drivers of innovation, facilitators of export diversification, instruments of social inclusion and the linchpins of the domestic supply chains. Alongside their burgeoning significance, MSMEs continue to battle the time-tested structural handicaps of access to finance, outdated technology, managerial deficiencies, human resource gaps, poor infrastructure, payment delays, limited market access, regulatory overload and increasing competition from global players. The study explores key opportunities and challenges in the Indian MSME sector in the wake of digital transformation, formalization, global value chain (GVC) integration, sustainable practices, e-commerce platforms, financial innovation and the emerging technologies.

The research utilizes a qualitative and analytical research approach consisting of a review of academic literature, government and policy documents and institutional studies to examine key factors impacting the MSMEs of tomorrow. It asserts that for India's MSMEs to be competitive in the future, it will be critical not just to increase their numbers, but also to boost productivity, technology capacity, institutional financial access, skills, innovation, sustainability and market connectivity. It draws the conclusion that an integrated approach encompassing the government, financial institutions, industry associations, technology firms, educational bodies and the MSMEs themselves is required to transform the sector into a globally competitive catalyst for inclusive and sustainable development, from its current perch as mostly survivalist firms.

KEYWORDS: *MSMEs, entrepreneurship, digital transformation, access to finance, innovation, global value chains, sustainable development, etc.*

Introduction: From Small Enterprises To Strategic Economic Actors:

Today, a proper understanding of the role of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in contemporary economic discourse requires more than paying a mere modicum of attention to their being "small". MSMEs, taken collectively, constitute a powerful engine that not only drives employment generation and encourages entrepreneurship, but also stimulates the local economy, diversifies industrial output, and serves to link communities into broader national and global markets. Specifically, MSMEs in

India are a particularly key sector as they merge economic activity with job-intensive development. Their importance is highlighted by the Ministry of MSME, calling the sector a "critical growth driver for [India's] economic and social development" and recent government estimates placing their output at approximately a third of national GDP and almost half of its exports (Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises).

Moreover, even with the global disruptions posed by rapid technological advancements, increased geopolitical instability, supply-chain readjustments, climate challenges, and a dynamic landscape of consumer behavior, the significance of MSMEs is now more central than ever. According to the latest Economic Survey 2025-26, MSMEs form the backbone of India's industrial economy, contributing 31.1 percent of GDP, 35.4 percent of output in manufacturing and 48.58 percent of its exports ("Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises Form the Backbone"). There is no question that MSMEs are not at the margin, but central to India's economic transition. Despite the sheer economic scale, however, there is a significant concentration of vulnerable smaller firms operating with minimal financial and technological resources, and limited connection to formal markets. Perhaps not surprisingly, the issue of access to finance is consistently cited by the World Bank as the primary hurdle to growth for small and medium sized enterprises in developing countries.

In India, the gap between the MSME demand and financing available from financial institutions has been estimated over and over (World Bank). Consequently, this paper's thesis holds that the future of MSMEs will be anchored in convergence: formalization, finance, technology, skills, innovation, market access, sustainability, and enabling structures and support. The question is no longer simply how to keep MSMEs afloat, but how to equip them with the tools they need to grow, innovate, be competitive and integrated in global value chains.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES:

This study aims at doing the following:
1. Analyzing the economic and development role of MSMEs in the Indian context.
2. Identifying the chief hurdles restraining their growth and competitiveness.
3. Studying the emerging opportunities presented by digitalization, innovation, financing, exports, and integration with global value-chains.
4. Evaluating the role of government and institution interventions for building the MSME ecosystem.
5. Proffering strategic interventions for enabling competitive, viable, and sustainable MSMEs.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

The methodological approach used in the study is qualitative, descriptive, and analytical, and is entirely based on secondary data. I have extensively reviewed scholarly literature, policy and official government reports, institutional and international development documentations, and the relevant print media literature for grasping the structural features and future trajectories of MSMEs. Thus, the major sources I am relying upon include publications of the Ministry of MSME, Indian Government, Economic Surveys and policy documents published by NITI Aayog and SIDBI, various policy documents of the Government of India, and studies undertaken by the World Bank. The evidence was presented in themes and organized into major categories such as finance, technology, skills, markets, infrastructure, formalization, sustainability, global competitiveness, etc., through descriptive and thematic analysis.

This study is not claiming to present primary survey findings, rather synthesizing already available information and evidence, so as to arrive at a comprehensive perspective toward understanding of the opportunities and obstacles lying before the Indian MSME sector.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

MSMEs are widely recognized in the existing literature as creators of employment, entrepreneurs, incubators of innovation, poverty reduction engines and a catalyst for regional economic development. The World Bank considers SMEs to be important players in their economic development and job creation and points to access to credit as a significant constraint for their development and emphasizes that a significant credit demand of MSMEs is at variance with its actual supply in developing nations (World Bank). The policy documents published by Ministry of Micro Small and Medium Enterprises similarly view MSMEs as crucial instruments for inclusive development in India; they contribute substantially toward the GDP, exports, job creation, and social development according to the reporting of Ministry of MSME. Increasing importance is recently laid upon improving, competitiveness, formality, credit access, technology augmentation and markets of SMEs instead of simply shielding the firms.

The book *Enhancing Competitiveness of MSMEs in India* is especially focused on understanding the reasons behind the inadequacy in investment, skills, innovation and access to finance and market, and stresses that SMEs integration into global value-chains must be enhanced (NITI Aayog). SIDBI provides an assessment of current MSME scene and finds a credit demand-supply gap of about thirty lac crore and believes that adequate and timely access to credit is still an issue in particularly for the micro ones that still rely upon informal finance (SIDBI). Moreover, SIDBI recognizes that future competitiveness hinges around digitization, technology upgrades, sustainability, innovation, financial management and good governance. Therefore, we find that there is a transition toward productivity, competitiveness, digitization, innovation and globalization from survival, finance and government protection, and in that transition direction, the research study proceeds on from here.

MSMEs as Instruments of Inclusive Economic Development:

The primary opportunity available to MSMEs lies in the fact that they bring together economic growth and job creation. Most MSMEs fall into labor-intensive manufacturing and service sectors, in contrast to highly capital-intensive industries, and thus employ large numbers of people who may otherwise have little access to large, formal organizations. It also promotes geographic diversification.

Location outside metropolitan areas to other areas spurs on entrepreneurial development in rural and semi-urban areas.

In Traditional industries, handicrafts, food processing, garments, footwear, Toys, Repair service, Tourist services, along with many local businesses they demonstrate how MSME enterprises may connect local resources with marketable interests. They equally contribute to social inclusivity. MSME entrepreneurship offers a route to economic autonomy for women entrepreneurs, younger businessmen and women, artisans, those starting business, first time business owners and marginalized communities. According to the latest Annual Report the MSME Sector, "While the sector continues to play a major role in employment generation and inclusive growth of economy." (Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises) The MSME sector ought to, therefore, be treated as an institution of distributed economic participation not merely a manufacturing segment.

Digital Transformation:

The Key Opportunity Undoubtedly, the most significant opportunity for MSMEs lies in digitalization or the digital transformation. Digital technologies assist MSMEs to lower transaction costs, communicate effectively and cost-efficiently, extend access to markets and improve the quality of accounting records, ease processes of e-transactions and get direct communication to Customers outside geographical borders, e-commerce websites allow them to reach both national and international Consumers without significant investment in their own delivery system. Similarly, digital media like Facebook and Twitter allow them to introduce products with minimal investment in the creation of Brand identities. In addition, digitalisation could expand financial opportunities through the use of digitally recorded transactions- invoices, payments and even payment trails in e-transactions, to measure creditworthiness. This will eventually make small firms accessible to Finance from banks. There will be a tendency towards digitally documented transactions rather than cash and informal Transactions.

Nonetheless, there should not be only just developing a website or accepting digital payments. Instead the focus should be on truly transformational digitalization in the shape of Accounting system, Enterprise- Resource Planning, Customer Relation Management, Cybersecurity system, Data analysis service, Cloud service, Artificial intelligence system etc., etc. (Ministry of Micro Small and Medium enterprises). Recent policies include support for Innovation and access for advanced Technologies the MSME Hackathon 5.0 organized by the Ministry 0.2 (Ministry of Micro Small and Medium Enterprises).

Access to Finance: The Persistent Structural Challenge:

Finance is one of the most profound issues of concern with regard to MSMEs in spite of improvements to institutional credit. Micro enterprises may not have collateral, audited financial statements, or formal credit history along with poor financial literacy leading to higher perceived lending risk, and a resulting push towards informal finance.

While the World Bank notes a large MSME finance gap in India; more recently, analysis by SIDBI still points to a large addressable credit gap (World Bank; SIDBI). The issue seems not just to be one of availability but also one of timeliness, cost, product and accessibility-after the production period is over, a loan might not be so useful to a small business, or maybe the small enterprise needs working capital, not just a capital investment loan. Hence, aspects such as credit-guarantee mechanisms, digital lending, fintech platforms, invoice financing, and better credit information system are significant opportunities.

Schemes like the Credit Guarantee Fund Trust for Micro and Small Enterprises (CGTMSE) by the government address the collateral-related constraints. Statistics indicate there has been significant expansion of guarantee cover for MSMEs. However, it is essential for financial inclusion to be matched by financial literacy so that entrepreneurs do not fall into excessive debt with a lack of adequate management of financial aspects of the business; financial advice, accounting and business planning skills, financial advisory services become crucial as much as actual loans.

Technology, Productivity, and Innovation:

A second fundamental problem is technological obsolescence. A large segment of MSMEs are still relying on outdated modes of production which constrain productivity, product quality consistency, ability to scale up and competitiveness of the firms. Technology upgrading is crucial for a second reason; Indian MSMEs are no longer challenged by domestic private entities only but also by firms integrated in global production value-chains. Significant productivity gains can arise from digital manufacturing, automation, AI, additive manufacturing, IOT techniques, data driven manufacturing, etc.

This leads to a chicken-and-egg scenario. Though firms with most urgent needs are financially weakest. This necessitates augmenting tech acquisition with collective infrastructure, tech centers, incubation models, training programs, clusters, appropriate digital access, etc. An emphasis on innovation, skills, financing and access to markets in the NITI Aayog document shows that we cannot achieve competitive MSMEs through individual interventions (NITI Aayog). Our future model should move beyond Individual Firm Upgrade towards Ecosystem based upgrade whereby clusters of enterprises would benefit from shared infrastructure/technology centers/design capabilities/logistics/training access/market intelligence.

Skill Development and Managerial Capability:

'The 'Human Capital Gap': MSMEs typically lack suitable human resources. They are unable to acquire employees possessing the technical, digital, managerial, marketing, and financial skills required. Two aspects contribute to the deficit of human capacity: (a) they need a pool of skilled labour (b) they also need business management skills for the entrepreneurs themselves. An entrepreneur who is well-versed in a technical area may be clueless on matters of taxation, digital marketing, HR, financial planning, exporting, intellectual property rights (IPR) or quality accreditation.

It is therefore necessary that skill-development initiatives move from a generalized approach towards business-aligned capability development for enterprises. Apprenticeship, academia-industry interface, entrepreneurship education, digital competency, and specialized sector training can make enterprises productive. Universities and technical training institutes can help by establishing entrepreneurship incubators, consultancies, entrepreneurship labs, and the relevant industry-linked skill development.

Market Access and Global Value Chains:

Market access offers a hurdle as much as it presents a gigantic opening. The majority of MSMEs may be capable of adequate production but can neither access bigger customers, nor get their produce to such customers due to problems with branding and insufficient marketing channels, poor packaging, insufficient certification, and information asymmetry about markets. One way to scale up could be through global value chain integration. The inclusion of both multinational and large domestic firms can expose MSMEs to: global standards, superior manufacturing processes, demanding quality parameters and new technologies.
Indeed, one of the solutions for job-rich industrialization identified by Economic Survey 2025-26 is enhanced participation in global supply chains. But there are dangers involved in joining this international bandwagon. International competition can put a strain on MSMEs because requirements-at a minimum-are dictated by a higher price tolerance, acceptable levels of product quality, on-time deliveries, desirable working conditions, environment-friendly processes and traceability. Further concerns about risks involved in this process could stem from protectionist and trade tensions among nations, tariffs, geopolitical unrest, disruptions to supply chains impacting exporting MSMEs as SIDBI notes (SIDBI). This suggests that the approach ought to be competitive integration rather than separation.

Delayed Payments and Working-Capital Pressure:

Delayed payment from buyers remains a particularly damaging problem for small enterprises. A large company may be capable of absorbing a delayed receivable; a micro enterprise often cannot. When invoices remain unpaid, the enterprise may be unable to purchase raw materials, pay workers, service loans, or accept new orders. Consequently, payment discipline is fundamental to MSME sustainability. Digital invoicing, transparent payment monitoring, stronger implementation of statutory provisions concerning delayed payments, and efficient dispute-resolution mechanisms can significantly improve cash-flow stability. The issue demonstrates an important principle: MSME policy is not solely about helping enterprises obtain money; it is also about preventing the unnecessary blockage of money already earned.

Sustainability and the Green MSME:

Agenda Climate change and environmental regulation will also influence MSME competitiveness over time. Energy and resource-intensive MSMEs can expect increasing cost pressures, environmental regulations and expectations by global customers about sustainable practices in production. Simultaneously the green transformation can open up new market opportunities.

MSMEs can become producers of components of renewable energy-driven technologies, efficient and energy-conserving equipment, sustainable packaging and products from recyclable materials, electric mobility components, materials for green construction as well as eco-friendly services.

Such transition calls for access to green financing, energy audit, clean technology, technical advisory and relevant standards. Hence sustainable production needs to be viewed not merely as a compliance requirement but a strategic business opportunity. Formalization and Integration within Institutions There is a considerable opportunity to reshape the MSME ecosystem through formalisation linking enterprises to institutional credit, government procurement and subsidies, training, insurance, digital technologies and mainstream markets. Udyam Registration a move in this direction has dramatically scaled-up identification of enterprises for which some official record exists. Government reporting points to substantial growth in formalization through both Udyam Registration and Udyam Assist Platform.

However, formalization should not become just an additional task for compliance purpose; rather ideally should present opportunities through an inclusive system for registration. Entrepreneurs will be more forthcoming towards formality if and when registration leads to enhanced access to finance, markets, insurance, technology, procurement opportunities with the government and business development support services. Thus, the policy should be formalization via inducements rather than only via mandate for formalization.

CONCLUSION:

The future of India's MSME sector presents a compelling paradox: the sector is simultaneously one of the country's greatest economic strengths and one of its most structurally vulnerable segments. Its contribution to GDP, manufacturing, exports, employment, entrepreneurship, and regional development makes its continued expansion indispensable to India's aspiration for inclusive and sustainable economic growth. The evidence examined in this study demonstrates that the prospects for MSMEs are considerable. Digitalisation, e-commerce, fintech, emerging technologies, global value-chain integration, government procurement, green industries, and expanding domestic consumption can provide unprecedented opportunities for growth. Recent policy initiatives demonstrate an increasing institutional recognition that MSME development must move beyond traditional protection toward competitiveness and productivity. SIDBI's assessment similarly concludes that the sector's outlook remains favourable, provided enterprises improve digitalisation, technology, sustainability, innovation, financial discipline, governance, and transparency (SIDBI).

At the same time, finance, skills, technology, delayed payments, infrastructure, market access, and regulatory challenges continue to restrict the ability of many enterprises to scale. These challenges cannot be solved through a single scheme or institution. They require coordinated intervention across the entire entrepreneurial ecosystem.

The central policy shift should therefore be from “supporting smallness” to “enabling scale.” MSME’s should be empowered to grow without losing the flexibility and employment intensity that make them socially valuable. Formalization should open doors rather than create burdens; technology should become accessible rather than exclusive; finance should become timely rather than merely available; and globalisation should become an opportunity for capability building rather than a source of vulnerability.

Finally, India's MSMEs can become a powerful bridge between grassroots entrepreneurship and globally competitive industrialization. Their transformation from survival-oriented enterprises into productive, innovative, digitally enabled, sustainable, and internationally connected businesses will be crucial to the realisation of India's long-term development ambitions. The future of MSMEs is therefore not simply a question of enterprise policy—it is a question of **how India designs its next phase of inclusive economic transformation.

REFERENCES:

1. Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises. Annual Report 2024–25. Government of India, 2025.
2. Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises. Annual Report 2025–26. Government of India, 2026.
3. NITI Aayog. Enhancing Competitiveness of MSMEs in India. Government of India, 2025.
4. Press Information Bureau. "Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises Form the Backbone of India's Industrial Economy: Economic Survey 2025–26." Press Information Bureau, Government of India, 29 Jan. 2026.
5. SIDBI. Annual Report 2024–25: MSME Outlook. Small Industries Development Bank of India, 2025.
6. World Bank. India: Raising and Accelerating MSME Performance. World Bank, 2021.
7. World Bank. Financing India's MSMEs: Estimation of Debt Requirement of MSMEs in India. World Bank, 2018.
8. World Bank. "World Bank Approves $750 Million Loan to India to Catalyze Private Financing and Support Economic Growth." World Bank, 29 June 2022.