

## **Innovation Yatra: A Journey of Scientific Empowerment in Rural India**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The "Innovation *Yatra* (meaning journey in Hindi)" is a notable initiative by the National Innovation Foundation-India, aimed at fostering scientific temperament and nurturing grassroots innovation across the country. This paper explores the role of the various *Yatras* in promoting scientific inquiry, creativity, and entrepreneurship, particularly in rural and semi-urban regions. Rooted in the Indian constitutional directive to develop scientific temper, the *Yatra* seeks to empower individuals by providing a platform for showcasing innovations that address local challenges. Through workshops, mentoring sessions, and innovation challenges, it engages with local communities to inspire critical thinking and problem-solving based on empirical evidence. Such initiatives bridge the urban-rural divide in innovation, providing mentorship, funding, and awareness about government schemes such as Startup India and Atal Innovation Mission, thereby fostering a culture of collaboration among innovators, entrepreneurs, policymakers, and educational institutions. This review includes case studies, such as the Startup India Innovation *Yatra* and the Honey Bee Network's Shodh *Yatra*, to illustrate the initiative's impact on identifying and empowering grassroots innovators. It also highlights the role of key stakeholders such as government agencies, non-governmental organisations, private enterprises, and educational institutions, contributing to the *Yatras'* success apart from discussing the challenges. The Innovation *Yatra* fosters an inclusive, sustainable, and impactful innovation ecosystem that encourages the pursuit of STEM

careers and supports local innovators in scaling their solutions for national and global impact, contributing to India's future as a global leader in science and technology. Collectively, these Yatras play a vital role in fostering a culture of innovation and merit wider implementation to empower grassroots innovators nationwide.

**Keywords:** Innovation *Yatra*, Grassroots Innovations, Scientific temper, Entrepreneurship, STEM

### Introduction

With its rich scientific achievements and innovation history, India is on the verge of becoming a global leader in science and technology (Bhattacharjee, 2024). Over the years, several initiatives have been launched to foster innovation, entrepreneurship, and scientific inquiry across the country (Gupta, 2016). One such initiative that has slowly gained prominence is the *Yatra* (journey), a series of journeys aimed at nurturing and tapping into India's scientific temperament, particularly among the youth and grassroots innovators (Ustyuzhantseva, 2015).

Such initiatives foster creativity, inspire scientific inquiry, and promote innovation, particularly in rural and semi-urban regions where access to resources and platforms for scientific development may be limited (Dey & Gupta, 2020). The purpose of the *Yatra* is to highlight the importance of innovation in addressing societal problems, improve the scientific temperament of citizens, and build a network of entrepreneurs, scientists, students, and policymakers who can drive India's technological progress (Koottatep *et al.*, 2020). Here, the "Innovation *Yatra*" signifies an organised undertaking as a journey or outreach campaign focused on '*taking innovations directly to the grassroots level*' while identifying, nurturing, and advocating for innovative projects and ideas across the country's various regions.

This paper delves into the role of the various *Yatra(s)* in fostering scientific temperament in India, its impact on grassroots innovation, and the role of multiple stakeholders, including government agencies, educational institutions, non-profits, and industry, in supporting and promoting this initiative.

## 1. The Concept of Scientific Temperament in India

"Scientific temperament" refers to an attitude of curiosity, rational thinking, and evidence-based decision-making (Kankaria & Chakraborty, 2024). It involves questioning, exploring, and innovating based on logic and empirical evidence. Scientific temperament is not limited to scientists and researchers but is essential for all citizens in a modern, knowledge-based society (Sharma *et al.*, 2020).

The Indian Constitution explicitly promotes scientific temperament among its citizens. Article 51A(h) states that it is the duty of every citizen "to develop scientific temper, humanism, and the spirit of inquiry and reform" (Bhargava, P. 2015; Kankaria & Chakraborty, 2024). This constitutional directive highlights the importance of fostering a culture of rational thinking, innovation, and inquiry in India.

Despite this constitutional mandate, however, there have been challenges in promoting scientific temperament across India, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas where access to quality education, scientific resources, and platforms for innovation may be limited (Upreti & Malhotra, 2024). In this context, *Innovation Yatras* may play a critical role in bridging these gaps and spreading the spirit of scientific inquiry throughout the country.

## 2. The Genesis and Objectives of the Innovation Yatra

The concept of "*Yatra*" has deep cultural significance in India, often associated with spiritual pilgrimages or quests for enlightenment (Singh, 2006). In the context of innovation, the *Innovation Yatra* represents a journey to discover and promote creativity, scientific inquiry, and entrepreneurial spirit across the length and breadth of the country (Kumar & Bhaduri, 2014; Mani, 2023). *Yatra*, here, represents a journey to discover and promote creativity, scientific inquiry, and entrepreneurial spirit across the length and breadth of the country.

The "Shodh *Yatra*: A Journey of Exploration" was conceptualised in 1998 (SRISTI, 2025) as a way to promote people to people learning by physically reaching out to the remotest corners of the country and tapping into the vast pool of talent that exists outside the metropolitan cities (Gupta, 2006;

Gupta, 2016). The *Yatra* concept has also been adopted by several non-governmental organisations (NGOs), educational institutions, and private enterprises to promote grassroots innovation and scientific thinking in different parts of the country (Gupta, 2016; Ministry of Commerce and Industry, 2024). These efforts aim to identify and support local innovators who are solving societal problems through science, technology, and innovation, which can lead to the promotion of developing countries (Aubert, 2005).

Another example is the "Startup India *Yatra*," a government-led initiative to promote entrepreneurship and innovation among Indian youth (Ministry of Commerce and Industry, 2024). The journey typically involves a group of mentors, experts, and facilitators travelling across different regions of India, visiting educational institutions, startups, research centres, and communities to engage with innovators, entrepreneurs, students, and local leaders (Nagar & Ahmad, 2024). Through workshops, mentoring sessions, and innovation challenges, the *Yatra* seeks to nurture a culture of innovation and scientific inquiry among young people and grassroots innovators (Mani, 2023).

### 3. Key Players in the *Yatra*

Several key players contribute to the success of *Yatras*, each playing a specific role in promoting scientific temperament and innovation in India:

- **Government Agencies:** The government supports Innovation *Yatras* by providing policy support, funding, and infrastructure. Initiatives such as Startup India, the Atal Innovation Mission, and the Ministry of Science and Technology, along with the Ministry of Culture, promote innovation through schemes, grants, and incubation support, while the State Science and Technology has also been instrumental in supporting the schemes (Ministry of Commerce and Industry, 2024; PIB, 2024).

- **Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)/ Voluntary Organisations (VOs) or Networks:** NGOs/VOs such as SRISTI and the Honey Bee Network have pioneered promoting grassroots innovation in India. These organisations have conducted various *Yatras* to identify and support rural innovators

and encourage scientific thinking in underserved communities (Gupta, 2010; Gupta, 2016). Similarly, *Palle Srujana* has been organising the *Chinna Shodhyatra* since 2011 to identify innovations and creativity at the grassroots level. Jagriti Sewa Sansthan has been organising the Jagriti Yatra (train journey), designed to foster understanding and development of smaller towns and villages through enterprise.

- **Educational Institutions:** Schools, colleges, and universities play a critical role in the Innovation *Yatra* by hosting events, workshops, and innovation challenges. Institutions like the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Indian Institutes of Science Education and Research (IISERs), and National Institutes of Technology (NITs) have been at the forefront of promoting scientific temperament through their participation (Dwivedi & Joshi, 2019; Dahm *et al.*, 2021).

- **Private Sector and Startups:** The private sector, including industry leaders and startups, is actively involved in Innovation *Yatra* through mentoring, funding, and incubation support. Several corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives are also aligned with fostering innovation and scientific inquiry in rural areas (Krishnan *et al.*, 2021).

- **Innovators and Entrepreneurs:** The fundamental driving forces behind the *Yatra* are the innovators and entrepreneurs who participate in these journeys. From students to grassroots inventors, these individuals bring creative solutions to real-world problems, contributing to India's innovation ecosystem (Government of Telangana, 2020).

#### **4. Impact of various *Yatra* on Scientific Temperament and Innovation Culture**

The *Yatras* have significantly impacted the development of scientific temperament and the promotion of a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship in India. This section explores some of the key areas where the *Yatras* have made a difference:

- **4.1. Empowering Grassroots Innovators:** One of the most notable achievements of the *Yatra* has been its ability to identify and empower grassroots innovators who are often overlooked by mainstream innovation ecosystems (Gupta, 2016). Through these

journeys, local innovators—usually working on solutions to specific local challenges—are provided with a platform to showcase their ideas (Government of Telangana, 2020). Examples include farmers developing low-cost agricultural tools, rural women creating innovative products for health and sanitation, and young students designing energy-efficient solutions for their communities. These grassroots innovators often lack access to formal education, financial resources, or mentorship. The *Yatra* brings these resources to their doorstep, helping them scale their innovations and reach a wider audience (Department of Science and Technology, 2023).

**4.2. Encouraging Scientific Inquiry in Rural Areas:** The efforts to reach the masses play a crucial role in fostering a spirit of scientific inquiry in rural and semi-urban areas, where access to scientific resources and platforms may be limited (Boseraju, 2024). The *Yatra* encourages participants to think critically, ask questions, and experiment with new ideas by conducting workshops, seminars, and hands-on activities. This exposure to scientific inquiry helps break down the barriers of superstition, pseudoscience, and traditional thinking, promoting a more rational and evidence-based approach to problem-solving (Gupta, 2016; Boseraju, 2024).

**4.3. Inspiring Youth to Pursue STEM Careers:** By bringing together successful entrepreneurs, scientists, and industry leaders, Innovation *Yatra* inspires young students to pursue careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Students participating in the “science outreach programs” gain firsthand exposure to the potential of scientific innovation in addressing societal challenges, encouraging them to take up STEM subjects and contribute to India's scientific and technological progress (ISTI, 2024).

**4.4. Bridging the Urban-Rural Divide in Innovation:** India's innovation landscape has historically been concentrated in urban centres, leaving rural areas with limited access to resources, mentorship, and platforms for innovation. The Innovation *Yatra* helps bridge this urban-rural divide by reaching out to innovators in rural and semi-urban areas. By exposing them to experts, investors, and policymakers, the *Yatra* creates opportunities for rural innovators to bring their solutions to a national and global audience (Choudhury & Shaw, 2024).

**4.5. Building an Innovation Ecosystem:** The *Yatras* play a critical role in building an ecosystem that supports innovation at all levels. It brings together diverse stakeholders—including government agencies, educational institutions, private sector leaders, and grassroots innovators—creating a network that fosters collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and mentorship. This ecosystem is essential for nurturing a culture of innovation in India and ensuring that innovative ideas can scale and make a lasting impact (Ministry of Commerce and Industry (2024)).

## 5. Case Studies of Successful *Yatras*

Several such *Yatras* have taken place across India, each with a unique focus and objectives. This section highlights a few successful *Yatras* that have made a significant impact on India's scientific and innovation landscape:

**5.1. Honey Bee Network's *Shodh Yatra*:** The Honey Bee Network (HBN), founded by Professor Anil Gupta, is a pioneering initiative that promotes grassroots innovation in India. The HBN and SRISTI (Society for Research and Initiatives for Sustainable Technologies and Institutions), a developmental voluntary organisation providing institutional support to the HBN, have organised 53 *Shodh Yatras* (journeys on foot typically covering 100-120 km over 5-6 days) to identify and support grassroots innovators, particularly in rural and tribal areas across the country. These *Yatras* focus on discovering local solutions to everyday problems, such as low-cost agricultural tools, energy-efficient devices, and affordable healthcare solutions (Gupta, 2006; Gupta, 2016). One of the key successes of the *Shodh Yatra* has been its ability to draw attention to the tremendous creative potential of rural India. By documenting and sharing these grassroots innovations, the network has created a repository of knowledge that can be shared through its website featuring various databases. The *Yatras* have also played a key role in linking rural innovators with government agencies, investors, and research institutions, enabling them to scale their innovations and make a broader impact (Smith *et al.*, 2017).

**5.2. Startup India *Yatra*:** The Startup India *Yatra*, launched as part of the larger Startup India initiative of 2016, was

designed to promote entrepreneurship and innovation among the youth, focusing on rural areas and Tier-II and Tier-III cities. The journey covered multiple states and regions, visiting educational institutions, local innovation hubs, and startups to engage with young entrepreneurs and innovators (Ministry of Commerce and Industry (2024)). The *Yatra* features innovation challenges, hackathons, and mentorship sessions, allowing participants to showcase their ideas and receive expert guidance. The Startup India *Yatra* has been instrumental in creating awareness about government schemes, funding opportunities, and incubation support for startups. It has also been key in inspiring young entrepreneurs to pursue their ideas and contribute to India's innovation ecosystem (Thippeswami & Poojitha, 2020). Similarly, states like Maharashtra and Odisha organised startup yatras in 2022 and 2023, respectively.

**5.3. National Innovation Foundation-India (NIF)'s Innovation *Yatra*:** NIF, an autonomous institution under the Department of Science and Technology, Government of India, has been involved in many such yatras. In response to a gap identified by its Dissemination and Social Diffusion (DSD) division, an initiative to take innovations directly to grassroots communities was taken under the Atmanirbhar Bharat program. As part of this effort, four simultaneous 11-day Innovation Yatras were organised, covering 14 States and Union Territories. These Yatras aimed to raise awareness about grassroots and student-driven innovations. The program focused on showcasing 29 technologies that enhance rural employment, reduce labour burdens, promote sustainability, and support self-reliance (*Atmanirbharta*). It facilitated the mobilisation of technological ideas from rural populations, 605 innovations, traditional knowledge and farm practices, strengthening the nation's innovation capacity. Additionally, the Innovation *Yatra* served as a platform for disseminating region-specific literature on sustainable agricultural practices and promoting the diffusion of grassroots innovations through government departments, local officials, and district administrations. By highlighting these innovations, the *Yatra* sought to stimulate socio-economic growth and cultivate a culture of problem-solving and sustainability across India (Department of Science and Technology, 2023).

**5.4. Jagriti Yatra:** To encourage the spirit of entrepreneurship in Tier 2 and Tier 3 districts of India, Jagriti Sewa Sansthan has been organising the *Jagriti Yatra* (a train journey spanning about 8000 km over 15 days) since 2008. The aim is to inspire India's youth to devote their lives to enterprise-led development in central Indian districts, which will be connected further to the network of nation builders. This aims to fulfil their mission to nurture 1 Lakh entrepreneurs by 2030, with 28% of the participants usually taking up entrepreneurship after completing the *Yatra* (Mani, 2022).

## **6. Issues and challenges identified during the Innovation Yatra**

While the various *Yatras* have significantly impacted India's innovation and entrepreneurship landscape, several challenges were faced during the "Innovation *Yatra*" and must be addressed to ensure its continued success. This may be true for many innovators-entrepreneurs identified or supported during such *Yatras*.

a) **Access to Resources:** Despite the efforts during and after the *Yatras*, many grassroots innovators and entrepreneurs face challenges in accessing resources such as funding, technical expertise, and infrastructure. The lack of access to modern tools and equipment often limits the ability of innovators to scale their ideas (Gupta *et al.*, 2016) or for entrepreneurs to scale up their enterprises. This makes it difficult to sustain their impact over time.

b) **Cultural Barriers:** In some regions, cultural barriers such as superstition, traditional beliefs, and resistance to change can hinder the promotion of scientific temperament and innovation. Overcoming these barriers requires sustained efforts in education and awareness-building (Kumar, 2018).

c) **Limited Participation from Remote Areas:** While the Innovation *Yatras* aims to reach rural and remote areas, logistical challenges such as transportation, infrastructure, and communication can limit the participation of innovators from the most underserved regions. For the same reasons, the identification of innovators and the scalability of innovations remain primarily limited, even though they may be as impactful in other areas.

d) **Need for Greater Industry Involvement:** There is a need for greater involvement from industry leaders, mentors and investors, particularly in providing mentorship, funding, and incubation support (Nagar & Ahmad, 2024; Ravichandran & Dixit, 2024).

### 7. The Future of the Innovation *Yatra*

The Innovation *Yatra* can potentially transform India's future as a global science, technology, and innovation leader. To maximise its impact, several steps can be taken:

- **Expanding Reach:** The *Yatra* should expand its reach to cover more remote and underserved regions of India. This will require greater collaboration between government agencies, NGOs, and local communities to overcome logistical challenges and ensure that innovators from all over the country can access the platform.

- **Strengthening Partnerships:** Building stronger partnerships between government, industry, and educational institutions will be key to the *Yatra's* success. Industry leaders can provide mentorship, funding, and technical expertise, while academic institutions can play a greater role in fostering scientific temperament among students.

- **Enhancing Access to Resources:** The *Yatra* should improve grassroots innovators' access to resources, including funding, technical expertise, intellectual property protection, and marketing support. Establishing innovation hubs and incubation centres in rural areas can give innovators the tools and infrastructure they need to scale their ideas.

- **Promoting Inclusive Innovation:** The *Yatra* should continue to promote inclusive innovation by identifying and supporting innovators from marginalised communities, including women, tribal groups, and economically disadvantaged populations. This will ensure that the benefits of innovation are shared equitably across society.

### Conclusion

The Innovation *Yatra* has the potential to become a powerful platform for tapping into India's vast pool of talent and

creativity, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas. By promoting scientific temperament, encouraging innovation, and fostering entrepreneurial spirit, this initiative can help cultivate a thriving innovation ecosystem crucial to India's future as a global leader in science and technology.

Through its focus on grassroots innovations, the *Yatra* can empower local communities to develop solutions to their challenges while contributing to the broader national innovation ecosystem. The journey of the Innovation *Yatras* is ongoing. With continued support and collaboration from all stakeholders, it has the potential to unlock new opportunities for scientific and technological advancement in India. To maximise its impact, future iterations of the *Yatra* should prioritise establishing mentorship programs connecting innovators with experienced professionals, creating dedicated funding mechanisms for promising projects discovered during the journey, and developing online platforms to facilitate ongoing collaboration and knowledge sharing among participants. Furthermore, partnerships with academic institutions and industry leaders should be strengthened to provide access to resources, expertise, and market opportunities. As India continues to evolve as a knowledge-based economy, initiatives like the Innovation *Yatra* will play a pivotal role in ensuring that innovation is inclusive, sustainable, and impactful, contributing to the nation's long-term growth and development.

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### **Author's declaration**

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