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Case Study

Transformation from Microfinance Institution to Universal Bank: A Strategic Analysis of Bandhan Bank

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This case study examines the transformation of Bandhan from a microfinance institution (MFI) into a universal bank, analyzing how strategic intent, regulatory alignment, organizational restructuring, and customer-centric innovation enabled this transition.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The research adopts a strategic management and systems thinking perspective, using tools such as the McKinsey 7S Framework, SWOT analysis, and institutional theory to understand Bandhan's transition as a systemic shift rather than an isolated organizational change.

Findings: The study reveals that Bandhan's transition was driven by its strong microfinance legacy, social capital built through trust-based lending to women borrowers, and operational discipline rooted in its grassroots model.

Research Limitations: The study is primarily based on secondary data sources, and the findings are context-specific to Bandhan Bank and may not be fully generalizable to all microfinance institutions or banking transformations.

Managerial Implications: The study emphasizes that successful transformation from a microfinance institution to a universal bank requires balancing mission-driven financial inclusion with commercial banking efficiency.

Originality/Value: The study contributes original insights by examining Bandhan Bank's transition through a systems thinking and strategic management lens, highlighting transformation as an institutional evolution rather than a linear organizational change. It adds value to the literature on financial inclusion and banking reforms in India by demonstrating how social objectives and commercial banking practices can be effectively integrated to achieve scalable and sustainable growth.

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"While delivering microfinance services, we realize that it is not the last word for the development of the poor. There is a lot of other support that the poor need for their holistic development."

*- Mr. Chandra Shekhar Ghosh,
Chairman and Managing Director, Bandhan Bank*

Introduction

Bandhan Bank represents one of the most significant institutional transformations in India's financial history, transitioning from a development-oriented microfinance institution into a full-fledged universal bank. Originally founded in 2001 as a non-profit organization dedicated to poverty alleviation and women's empowerment, Bandhan Microfinance expanded rapidly over the next decade, eventually becoming the largest microfinance institution in India ([Das & Patnaik, 2015](#)). Its strong financial performance, robust repayment discipline, and commitment to financial inclusion enabled it to secure a universal banking license from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) in 2014, marking it as the first microfinance institution in the country to achieve this distinction ([Sarkar et al., 2015](#)). Bandhan Bank officially commenced operations in August 2015, introducing a unique hybrid banking model that combined commercial banking principles with the social mission of microfinance. This case study presents a detailed account of Bandhan's institutional evolution, leadership decisions, strategic directions, operational challenges, and socio-economic impact. It also analyzes how Bandhan balanced its dual objectives of profitability and social development amidst regulatory requirements and rising digital competition. The study offers insights for students and practitioners in banking, strategic management, and development studies who seek to understand how socially driven institutions can scale sustainably while maintaining their foundational missions. Bandhan Bank's emergence as India's first microfinance institution to transform into a universal bank stands as a landmark development in the history of financial inclusion ([Jagtap, 2017](#)). Beginning as a grassroots NGO under the leadership of Chandra Shekhar Ghosh, Bandhan was initially created to address the financial exclusion faced by poor women in rural and semi-urban parts of eastern India ([Sarkar et al., 2015](#)). Its early lending activities were based

on the premise that access to affordable credit could empower marginalized households and help them break out of poverty. Over time, the organization's disciplined approach to credit delivery, strong repayment culture, and operational efficiency helped it grow into a large microfinance institution serving millions of borrowers. When the RBI announced an open licensing process for new private sector banks in 2013, Bandhan was one of the few institutions whose social mandate aligned to enhance financial inclusion at the national level. Its selection by the RBI in 2014, along with IDFC, signified a major institutional shift from being a microfinance-focused NBFC to a commercial bank offering diverse financial services. This transformation was not only regulatory and structural but also operational and cultural, involving the development of new systems, products, and capabilities. The journey of Bandhan Bank thus provides deep insights into organizational reinvention driven by a combination of social purpose and strategic adaptability.

The Turning Point: Securing the Universal Banking License (Bandhan as a Universal Bank)

The decision of the RBI in 2014 to grant a universal banking license to Bandhan marked a historical turning point both for the institution and for the Indian financial system. During this period, the RBI was seeking to promote financial inclusion on a national scale and aimed to license new banks that demonstrated a commitment to serving low-income populations. Out of the 26 applicants, which included major corporate groups, Bandhan and IDFC emerged as the only two selected, primarily due to their strong track record, institutional governance, and alignment with national financial inclusion objectives. Bandhan's selection was particularly noteworthy because it had grown from a grassroots development organization rather than a corporate entity. To qualify, Bandhan had to reorganize its corporate structure, strengthen its governance framework, raise additional capital, and invest in technology infrastructure that could support banking operations. Its conversion from an NBFC-MFI to a bank involved intense restructuring, staff retraining, and compliance-readiness activities. The RBI's trust in Bandhan validated the organization's long-standing commitment to ethical financial practices and

demonstrated that socially driven institutions could successfully evolve into mainstream financial organizations. Bandhan Bank officially commenced operations on 23 August 2015, signaling the beginning of a new chapter.

When Bandhan Bank launched operations, it already had a large customer base built through its microfinance operations. The bank began with a capital base of Rs. 2,570 crore and a staff strength of approximately 19,500 individuals, making it one of the largest new bank launches in India. Its dual objectives were clearly defined: to expand the reach of formal financial services to underserved households and to offer a comprehensive range of banking products to the broader population. The bank adopted a mission that stayed true to its microfinance roots, emphasizing financial empowerment and inclusive banking. At the same time, it widened its vision to include modern banking services such as savings accounts, current accounts, term deposits, remittances, insurance distribution, and retail loans. Bandhan Bank pursued a unique customer segmentation strategy that differentiated between the "inclusion segment," primarily composed of low-income borrowers, and the "general banking segment," comprising salaried individuals, middle-income households, and small businesses. In the initial years, deposit mobilization was a major challenge, as Bandhan had to convince the public that it was not merely a microfinance institution but a safe and trustworthy bank. The bank offered attractive interest rates and built an extensive branch network with customer-friendly services, which helped attract new customers and deepen relationships with existing ones. The early years of its banking operations demonstrated Bandhan's ability to carry forward its microfinance ethos while embracing the demands of a competitive banking industry.

Business Model & Strategy: What Bandhan Bank Did Differently

Bandhan Bank's business model is strongly anchored in its microfinance origins, which enabled it to build a deep presence across rural and semi-urban regions traditionally underserved by conventional banks. This grassroots outreach helped Bandhan cultivate trust and long-term relationships with low-income households,

especially women borrowers. Even after its transformation into a universal bank, a large proportion of its branches remain concentrated in rural and semi-urban areas, reflecting its continued commitment to financial inclusion and community-focused services. After receiving its universal banking license, Bandhan diversified beyond microcredit by expanding into secured lending, including housing, MSME, and retail loans. It also strengthened its wholesale banking capabilities, creating a more balanced and less risk-concentrated portfolio. This shift marks an important transition from a predominantly microfinance institution to a full-service financial entity serving diverse customer needs. The ability to mobilize deposits provided Bandhan with a stable and cost-effective funding base. Growth in its Current Account and Savings Account (CASA) deposits has improved funding stability and supported healthy net interest margins. Despite diversification, Bandhan remains committed to serving financially excluded groups through accessible products and doorstep services. In recent years, it has also steadily de-risked its portfolio by increasing secured lending, thereby strengthening financial sustainability and long-term resilience.

What Makes Bandhan Bank Interesting as a Case Study

- Bandhan showcases how a microfinance NGO can evolve into a universal bank with large outreach. The journey highlights transformation challenges such as compliance, funding, diversification, and balancing social mission with profitability.
- **Diversification across loan products reduces segment-specific risk, but may compress margins.** Shifting from microfinance to secured lending stabilizes asset quality but often at the cost of higher yields. This is a trade-off many banks face.
- **Building a stable deposit base & CASA contribution is critical for long-term funding stability.** For a bank focused on under-banked or low-income clients, relying on deposits rather than wholesale borrowings helps reduce funding cost and risk.
- **Leadership, institutional systems, and internal culture matter beyond just**

Strengths	Weaknesses/Risks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deep reach in underserved rural/semi-urban markets and social-inclusion legacy Diversified loan book & product offerings beyond microfinance Strong deposit mobilization and CASA base stable funding Institutional maturity: employee development, risk awareness, diversified funding & lending 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Legacy exposure to microfinance and related credit risks Profitability volatility due to provisioning and loan write-offs Pressure on margins when shifting to lower-yield secured loans Regulatory / valuation overhang (promoter holding, earlier high valuation)
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand retail, housing, MSME, and wholesale banking, especially in underserved semi-urban/rural zones. Use deposit base and digital banking to attract new customers and cross-sell products. Leverage brand reputation for financial inclusion to penetrate new geographies or segments. Gradually build a stable, diversified, and lower-risk loan portfolio 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Macroeconomic slowdowns or rural distress affecting loan repayments – especially in unsecured/micro loans Intense competition from traditional banks, NBFCs, and fintech players Regulatory changes (e.g., in microfinance, banking norms) that may raise compliance or capital-requirement burdens Interest-rate fluctuations are compressing margins, especially with a secured lending focus

financial metrics. Bandhan's investments in employee development, internal mobility, risk management, and culture indicate how human resources and internal governance are key for sustainability and resilience.

- Navigating regulatory, valuation, and legacy-risk pressures is often more difficult than achieving growth.** As seen with Bandhan, rapid growth and listing can come with overvaluation; legacy microfinance exposure can come back to haunt; regulators and markets can penalize lapses.

Strategic Analysis

Bandhan's strategic positioning as a universal bank stemmed from its unique combination of grassroots presence and commercial banking capabilities. Its primary strength lies in its strong brand reputation in the microfinance sector, coupled with its extensive rural outreach and customer-centric service model. The institution's biggest internal weakness was its continued high dependence on microcredit, which exposed it to regional economic shocks and portfolio concen-

tration risks. However, Bandhan's transformation opened up substantial opportunities, particularly in digital banking, financial inclusion schemes, and cross-selling of financial products such as insurance and mutual funds. The bank also faced threats from intensifying competition, rising digital payment platforms, regulatory restrictions, and socioeconomic disruptions that could affect borrower repayments. The strategic challenge for Bandhan was to balance its two business engines while diversifying its portfolio to reduce vulnerabilities. The ability to integrate technology, strengthen risk management, and expand into new financial segments emerged as critical factors determining its long-term sustainability. Bandhan's transformation can be understood through the lens of the **McKinsey 7S Framework**, which reveals how the alignment of structure, strategy, systems, shared values, skills, staff, and leadership facilitated the shift from a microfinance-centric organization to a diversified bank. The most fundamental element driving the change was strategy. Bandhan's leadership recognized that remaining exclusively in microfinance would limit its ability to scale, mobilize deposits, diversify risks,

and broaden its financial offerings. The universal banking model allowed Bandhan to reduce dependence on external borrowing, access stable, low-cost deposits, and expand its product portfolio to include savings, remittances, insurance products, and small enterprise loans. This strategic redirection provided the foundation on which all other organizational components were restructured. Structurally, Bandhan had to evolve from a field-focused microfinance network into a multilayered banking organization with branches, compliance departments, treasury operations, risk management units, and IT infrastructure. This required formal departmentalization and the establishment of governance frameworks aligned with banking regulations.

Social Impact and Financial Inclusion Achievements

Despite the transition to a universal bank, Bandhan continued to uphold its core mission of financial inclusion. The bank maintained a strong focus on lending to women, supporting small entrepreneurs, and generating employment opportunities. Its activities contributed significantly to economic empowerment in rural and semi-urban areas, where access to formal finance remained limited. Bandhan's corporate social responsibility initiatives included efforts in education, health, skill development, and community infrastructure. These initiatives reinforced its identity as a socially oriented organization committed to holistic development ([Das & Patnaik, 2015](#)). Throughout its growth, Bandhan retained its commitment to ethical conduct, transparency, and customer protection, ensuring that its borrowers and account holders felt valued and supported. The bank's continued focus on grassroots empowerment distinguished it from many other commercial banks and strengthened its reputation as a

development-driven institution.

Conclusion

Bandhan Bank's journey from a microfinance institution to a universal bank is an exemplary story of institutional transformation rooted in purpose-driven leadership, strategic agility, and operational excellence. Its experience indicates that socially oriented organizations can expand sustainably and compete effectively if they maintain financial discipline, invest in human capital, and remain committed to mission-aligned growth. The transformation required significant organizational restructuring, compliance adaptation, and technological modernization, yet Bandhan succeeded in preserving its core values. While challenges persist, particularly related to portfolio concentration risks and competitive pressures, Bandhan's evolution demonstrates that deep-rooted social commitment can coexist with commercial banking objectives. Its story offers valuable lessons on inclusive banking, regulatory transition, and organizational renewal, making it a rich source of insight for students, researchers, and practitioners in financial services and strategic management.

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Teaching Notes

Title: Transformation from Micro-finance Institution to Universal Bank: A Strategic Analysis of Bandhan Bank

A Synopsis of the Case

This case examines Bandhan Bank's institutional transformation from a grassroots microfinance institution (MFI) into India's first universal bank originating from the microfinance sector. It narrates Bandhan's evolution from a development-focused NGO to the country's largest MFI, and later into a full-service bank operating under stringent regulatory frameworks. The case highlights the strategic intent behind this transition, the organizational restructuring required to meet the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) licensing norms, and the systemic changes in structure, culture, capabilities, and governance. It further explores Bandhan's hybrid model combining microfinance ethics with commercial banking, its customer-centric innovations, risk diversification, and financial inclusion strategies. Additionally, the case discusses how Bandhan maintained its grassroots mission while embracing modern banking systems, digital competition, and the pressures of regulatory compliance.

The Target Learning Group

This case is suitable for undergraduate and postgraduate students specializing in banking, finance, management, and development studies. It is also relevant for executives working in financial services, microfinance institutions, and strategic management roles. Educators teaching courses on financial inclusion, banking strategy, organizational transformation, and regulatory governance may find it particularly valuable.

The Learning/Teaching Objectives and Key Issues

The primary objective of this case study is to highlight how an institution can undergo large-scale transformation while maintaining its core mission and values. It emphasizes the strategic and operational shifts needed for Bandhan to graduate from microfinance to universal banking, including regulatory alignment, restructuring, capital adequacy, product diversification, and

enhancement of risk management systems. A key learning outcome is understanding how systems thinking, leadership decisions, and governance reforms shape organizational evolution. Students can further explore how Bandhan balanced mission orientation with commercial viability, and whether such institutions can sustain profitability while expanding financial inclusion. The case also allows learners to analyze strategic models such as SWOT and the McKinsey 7S Framework in the context of real-world banking challenges.

The Teaching Strategy

The case should be used to initiate discussions on organizational reinvention, especially within regulated industries like financial services. Instructors can highlight the significance of strategic intent, leadership vision, and structural reforms in building institutional legitimacy. The transition from MFI to universal bank enables a rich dialogue on compliance requirements, capital restructuring, technology upgrades, and risk diversification. The case also lends itself to discussions on customer-centric innovation, especially how Bandhan retained its microfinance ethos while delivering mainstream banking services. Educators can encourage students to evaluate the trade-offs between social mission and profitability, and the broader implications for inclusive banking models in emerging economies.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why was Bandhan's transformation from an MFI to a universal bank strategically necessary, and what advantages did it gain through this shift?
2. How did the organizational restructuring, governance changes, and cultural shifts required for banking operations affect Bandhan's existing microfinance identity?
3. What strategic lessons can be drawn from Bandhan's journey regarding inclusive banking, regulatory adaptation, and balancing dual missions?

Analysis of Data

Not applicable.

Background Reading

Students are encouraged to refer to textbooks on Strategic Management, Microfinance, and

Banking Regulations. Reading materials on financial inclusion, institutional theory, and transformation frameworks such as the McKinsey 7S Model may provide deeper insights. Annual reports of Bandhan Bank and RBI regulatory guidelines can also support a stronger understanding of the case.

Experience in Using the Case

Students should focus on developing analytical skills related to institutional transformation,

banking strategy, and regulatory compliance. They should be encouraged to critically examine how Bandhan leveraged its microfinance heritage while adapting to the demands of a universal bank. The case further offers opportunities to discuss portfolio diversification, risk management, customer service models, and the challenges faced by socially driven financial institutions. Concepts such as business model innovation, market positioning, and organizational culture change can also be explored to enhance learning outcomes.