

THE GLARING DIGITAL DIVIDE IN EDUCATION IN INDIA- CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

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Abstract

The importance of digital learning has reached its zenith in this pandemic period. This article discusses about the Digital gap in India, which plays a key role in education sector. It highlights the disparities prevailing in India and the contribution of poverty that widen the gap further. The article emphasizes the role and responsibility of private sectors that helps in resolving the existing digital divide. The author has mentioned some of the initiatives taken by the government to bridge the digital divide. Many reports have clearly mentioned the reasons for the lack of access to e-learning. And the author has come up with some innovative solutions to overcome the digital divide. To uplift our country from developing to developed economy it is very much important to digitally empower the country. Thus the scope of this article is to provide solutions and ideas to achieve universal digital education in India.

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Harish, a student in Darura village of Rajasthan, climbs a mountain everyday to access the internet connection to attend online classes. Whereas, Pranitha in Himachal Pradesh gets uninterrupted access to internet. In the COVID era, online education has become 'new normal'. But access to online education is a challenge to certain sections of society. The term 'digital divide' refers to inequity in opportunities presented by information and communication technology and the digital revolution in the realm of economic, social, cultural and political spheres.

According to **Pratichi report**, a report by Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, there are two components of digital divide.

1. Affordability- Whether families of students can afford devices of digital learning
2. Accessibility- It is uninterrupted data

There are certain factors that contribute to digital divide such as gender, access to content, lack of ICT skills etc... By overcoming these disparities, the benefits of e-learning can be reaped by all sections of society.

Benefits of e-learning

- Increases the digital literacy
- Students involvement in learning and productivity increases
- Makes students digitally smart
- Helps in using technology in a positive and constructive manner
- Universal coverage of education
- Paperless learning method
- Flexible to plan schedules



Challenges in digital divide

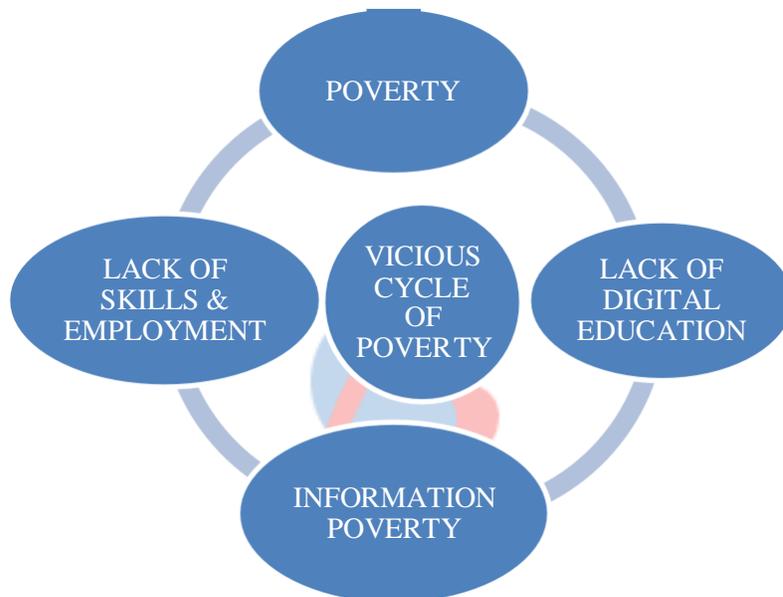
Our country has achieved impressive progress in science and technology and is emerging as one of the strongest economies in the developing world. Still there are challenges in the country that widen the digital gap. According to 75th Report of NSSO: 'Household consumption: Education India' survey, there are certain factors that contribute to the digital divide.

1. Urban-rural divide

In India, one-fourth of all homes have internet facilities. Among them, 42% of the homes in cities are getting access to the internet and only 15% of rural homes are getting an uninterrupted internet connection. This is due to the lack of infrastructure in the rural areas.

2. Economic status

The biggest divide is due to poverty. Those who are of high economic status easily get access to technology. So, poverty is contributing to the '**Information Poverty**'. The poor people, due to lack of technology skills, are getting more deprived, as it is difficult for them to compete with the fast-changing technological world.



3. Digital literacy

Only 20% of Indians, above the age of 5, have basic literacy. The digital literacy in the age group of 15-29 years is only 40%. This age group comprises of high school and college students, young parents responsible for teaching young children.

4. Regional disparity

Access to online education is unequal in the country. For example, children in urban Himachal Pradesh where internet penetration is higher than 70% will have much more access to education. Whereas, children in rural Odisha suffer to access education, as there is less than 6% of households have internet facilities.

Pratichi trust report

Amartya Sen's Pratichi Trust report found that in Kolkata, about 40% of primary school students couldn't attend online classes during the pandemic due to the digital divide.

Gender gap

GSMA's 2020 report on the mobile gender gap shows that only 21% of women in India are getting access to the internet. This shows that due to pandemic and online learning, women's education has been deprived further.

Digital divide impact on the demographic dividend

As most of the younger population is could not benefit from online education due to the digital divide, this will affect the working force in future. The Demographic dividend will lead to economic growth only when the working force is heavy and educated.

Amartya Sen says, "India is the first country, which is aiming to become an industrial giant with most unhealthy and illiterate workforce". Denial of education due to the digital divide further worsens the situation of the country.

Government measures to bridge the digital gap

India is taking significant steps towards acquiring competence in information and technology. Some of which are as follows,

1. Information and Technology (IT) Act, 2000

The Indian government passed IT Act, 2000 to promote e-commerce and e-governance.

2. Optical Fiber Network (OFN)

It is to ensure broadband connectivity to over 2 lakhs panchayats in India. This will help in achieving universal education.

3. Digital Mobile Literacy

It is an initiative of the Indian government to bridge the digital gap. It is done in collaboration with the centre for advanced computing (C-DAC) based in Pune.

4. Unnati

This initiative was started by Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited to bridge the digital divide in schools by providing rural students with poor economic and social backgrounds access to computer education.

5. DIKSHA (Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing)

It is India's, 'One Nation, One digital platform'. It provides access to a large number of curriculum-linked e-content through QR coded energized textbooks, courses for teachers, quizzes etc...

6. Swayam Prabha TV channel

32 channels are devoted to telecasting high-quality educational programs. These programs are focused to educate students with no internet access.

7. On AIR

It is activity-based learning through radio broadcasting. It helps in reaching remote areas where there is no internet facility.

Solutions to bridge the digital divide

Though the government has taken various measures, still there is a divide in digital education. To overcome this gap, certain initiatives can be taken which are as follows

1. Technology

Technology should be made universal and more feasible in the public education system. This will bridge the gap between private and public school students.

2. Expansion of Right to Education

Online learning has become mandatory in this pandemic situation and expected to continue in the upcoming years. So access to technology, e-learning provisions will suit Right to education in this contemporary era.

3. Addressing fear of online exploitation

UNESCO said, "Spending more time on the virtual platform can leave children vulnerable to online sexual exploitation and grooming, as predators look to expedite the COVID-19 pandemic". So, stringent laws should be imposed to overcome the fear of parents concern about children's safety.

4. Training the teacher

Technology will not replace great teachers, but technology in the hands of great teachers can be transformational.

- George Couros

Thus, training should be provided to the teachers which will make the digital education complete. Courses should be provided on technology to the government school teachers.

5. E-skilling

The Inclusion of virtual vocational training, virtual lab and skill development courses will contribute to bridging the gap in digital education.

6. Vernacular language

Certain students, studying in vernacular language, will not be able to access the information through the digital platform. Lack of content in vernacular language will lead to the digital divide. Thus, providing quality e-vernacular content is mandatory.

"Affordability and accessibility of quality education is of paramount importance". So, the government has to work on this to bridge the gap of the digital divide. It is the need of the hour to promote and ensure digital literacy among the people. Uninterrupted internet connectivity and mobile network signals in rural areas will ensure universal education. As a part of corporate social responsibility, private sectors can help in making e-resources accessible to students in government and low-income private schools.

By resolving these challenges through the provided solutions, the education sector in India will become digitally empowered. Ministry of Education has signed MoU with Microsoft on "Digital Transformation of Tribal Schools". Such initiatives in the upcoming period will make digital education accessible, affordable and universal. In the long term, all the government and private

schools in India can introduce the concept of '**Phygital**' education. It is the education provided by blending physical space with digital space. Entering into such innovations will help in nation-building.



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