

Digital Divide in India: Prospects and Challenges

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Abstract

Technology plays an important role in producing new ideas and removing barriers between the people. In the recent decade, the notion of 'digital divide' has been comprehensively and widely researched and has attracted large spectrum of public speculation for its economic, social and political consequences. Studies have revealed that the gap existing between those who have access to ICTs and those who do not have access creates exclusion, threatening social integration and hamper economic growth. This article discusses initiatives taken by government of India towards the access to digital information and the critical role played by numerous nationwide programs in bridging the digital divide. The article also focuses on some of the key impediments and barriers to digitization and the need for strong determination, good policy-making and political support in bridging the digital divide in the country (India).

Key Words: Digital Divide, Access, Internet, ICTs, Infrastructure.

Introduction

The term Digital Divide encompasses inadequate funding, a lack of necessary computer and Internet skills, and a lack of English-language proficiency that hinder expansion and use of digital information resources. Technology is a major force for change. It is a dynamic subject, continuously producing new ideas and development. The economic necessity for a working population skilled and confident in their use of information and communication technologies (ICT) has been widely accepted. Equally, technology has become a key factor in society as a whole, with an ever-increasing use of online communication to undertake daily tasks, such as checking train timetables, shopping for food, completing tax returns and taxing your car. It has occupied each and every part of our daily life.

Programmes Launched By Government of India For bridging digital divide:

Despite significant Teledensity of 81.82% (November 2015), there still exists a divide between rural and urban areas that needs to be bridged. Therefore, the Govt. of India has taken Digital India project in 2014.

Digital India: A programme to transform India into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy.

Vision of Digital India

Centered on 3 (three) Key Areas

- Digital Infrastructure as a Utility to Every Citizen
- Governance & Services on Demand
- Digital Empowerment of Citizens

Vision Area 1: Infrastructure as a Utility to Every Citizen

- **High speed internet** as a core utility
- **Cradle to grave digital identity** -unique, lifelong, online, authenticable
- **Mobile phone & Bank account** enabling participation in digital & financial space
- Easy access to a **Common Service Centre**
- Shareable **private space on a public cloud**
- **Safe and secure Cyber-space**

Vision Area 2: Governance & Services On Demand

- **Seamlessly integrated** across departments or jurisdictions
- **Services available in real time** from online & mobile platform
- **All citizen entitlements** to be available **on the cloud**
- Services digitally transformed for improving **Ease of Doing Business**
- Making **financial transactions electronic & cashless**
- Leveraging GIS for **decision support systems & development**

Vision Area 3: Digital Empowerment of Citizens

Universal **Digital Literacy**

- Universally accessible **digital resources**
- **All documents/ certificates to be available on cloud**
- Availability of digital resources / services in **Indian languages**
- **Collaborative digital platforms** for participative governance
- **Portability** of all entitlements through **cloud**

KEY PILLARS

The Digital India programme is based on the 9 (nine) pillars:

(1). **Broadband Highways**

Under this programme, high – speed broadband coverage highways will connect 250,000 villages, various government departments, universities, etc. In addition, National Information Infrastructure (NII) will ensure the integration of the network and cloud infrastructure within the country to provide high-speed connectivity to various government departments. These components include networks such as State Wide Area Network (SWAN), National Knowledge Network (NKN), National Optical Fibre Network (NOFN), Government User Network (GUN) and the MeghRaj Cloud.

(2). **Universal access to Mobile Connectivity**

Today, there exist around 55,619 villages in India that have no mobile coverage. To cover remote villages in the northeast, a comprehensive development plan has been initiated that will be carried out in phases.

(3). Public Internet Access Programme

The underlying principle of this initiative is to make 250,000 Common Service Centres (CSCs) operational at the gram Panchayat level for delivery of government services. In a similar move, 150,000 post offices will be converted into multi-service centres.

(4). E-governance: Reforming government through technology

The idea is to use business process re-engineering to transform government processes and make them simple, automated and efficient. Under this, forms will be simplified and only minimum and necessary information will be collected. Similarly, there will be a tracking process for the status of online applications. To further simplify the process, use of online repositories for certificates, educational degrees, identity documents will be encouraged so that these documents do not have to be submitted in the physical form.

(5). Ekranti - Electronic Delivery of Services

This pillar emphasises on the use of technology for service delivery such as e-education, e-healthcare, technology for planning, financial inclusion etc.

(6). Information for all

This is to provide open access to government information and documents available online. This will enable a two – way communication between the citizens and the government through online platforms and social media. The biggest success story is MyGov.in, a platform for citizen engagement in governance, which was launched by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi on 26th July 2014 as a medium to exchange ideas or suggestions with the government.

(7). Electronics manufacturing

Under this programme, the target is to reach net zero imports by 2020 through implementation in areas such as taxation, economies of scale, skill development, government procurement etc.

(8). IT for jobs

This step will provide the required skills and training to enable youth to find jobs in the IT/ITes sector. This component also emphasises on the setting up of BPOs to enable ICT-enabled growth.

(9). Early harvest programmes

These early harvest programmes consist of a range of projects to be carried out within a short timeline. This includes an IT platform for messages, e-greetings from the government, biometric attendance and Wi-Fi in all universities etc.

Role of libraries and information centres:

Libraries are vital for dissemination of information and play a central role to bridging the digital divide. Today the professional librarians are being better recognised as information

disseminators or communicators rather than custodians of information. Although digitization is progressing at a slow pace in India but, several projects like the National Science Digital Library (NSDL), Vidya Vahini Project, and Digital Mobile Library, national Digital Library etc have been the time bound interventions taken by the government to bridge the digital divide.

Challenges and Barriers To Bridging The Digital Divide

The basic requirement for reducing the digital divide is to give priority to the development of communication infrastructure and provide universal and affordable access to information to the people in all geographical divisions of the country. There are a number of barriers to bridging the digital divide. Although socially and economically deprived communities in India are gaining access to information technology and the use of internet but their benefits are limited because of the following reasons.

Infrastructural Barriers

Despite the tremendous growth of the Information technology since the early 1990's, India still lacks a robust telecommunication infrastructure. The necessary infrastructure is not at par with that of other nations; hence despite the rapid spread of the Internet, the digital divide is becoming wider as the technological standards grow even higher. Due to the lack of proper funding India is not able to develop the desired infrastructure for training of professionals.

Literacy and skill barriers

Education and information literacy plays a major part in keeping society from fragmenting into haves and have-nots. Literacy in the form of Information technology (IT) is very important to allow access to digital information. In the third world developing countries like India, Education in information literacy will play a significant role in keeping the society intact and prevent it from getting fragmented into a population of information haves and have-nots.

Economic barriers

Due to economic constraint or the lack of proper funding, the people of low socio-economic status do not have discretionary money to spend on private cyber-cafes or to have internet connectivity on their own to have the access digital information.

Content barriers

Access to information technology plays a key role in the dissemination of information freely between the people globally. Since no entity controls the Internet, any person with access internet has the potential to share his ideas and information. Therefore, if the problem of digital divide is to be solved, there is need of time bound and progressive effort on the part government to ensure that all citizens are able to receive the information content relevant to their lives as well as be able to produce their own ideas or content for their communities and for the Internet at large.

Language barriers

Language is a key vehicle which connects the people and is a source of sharing information between different groups. India is a multicultural and multilingual country. At present we are witnessing the information revolution in the world where large amount of information on the Internet is in English, which acts as a constraint or a barrier for the people of those countries where primary language of the people is not English.

Suggestions and conclusions

- (1) The unequal access to information and communication technologies has led to the digital divide not only in developing countries but also in developed countries as well. India has made number of efforts to bridge the gap by initiating a number of projects and programmes for rural and remote locations, a lot more needs to be done to bring the people into the information society.
- (2) There is a need of the hour is to promote technologies which are best suited to the requirements of the rural India. For example to bridge the gap of digital divide in its real sense there is need to increase PC penetration. The reason is very simple; mobile cannot do everything that a PC can.
- (3) The main barrier in Indian rural society is the fact that peoples under estimate the significance of communication technologies as a result they behave very passively towards the ICTs.
- (4) Promotion of telecommunication infrastructure in the rural India is the most important condition for bridging the rural-urban digital divide and government can play a vital role in creating the IT infrastructure in the rural India. A special expenditure should be marked for bridging the digital divide among the regions.
- (5) In India, there is a need of solving linguistic issues arising as a result of the diverse sections of population speaking diverse languages. English language is used nowadays in every field of life. There is a need to promote cultural diversity and the avoidance of social exclusion among non-English speaking population of India.
- (6) Due to lack of funds from governments, ICT projects have been on the decline due to budget constraints and global economic slowdown. With the effective deployment of ICT in the core areas of education, healthcare, and connectivity for redressing the grievances of the people in the countryside, the digital divide can be narrowed as wireless and satellite links have made them economical and affordable.
- (7) Apart from that, the Govt of India has taken PMGDISHA programme by which making one person in every family digitally literate and it is integral components of Digital India vision.
- (8) At the conclusions I would like to say that CSC services bridging the digital divide between rural and urban India and the govt. of india providing its digital services through UMANG mobile app apart from that, there is Central budgetary provision (2019) of making one lakh digital villages in India for bridging digital divide.

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