DIGITAL DIVIDE IN INDIA –AN OVERVIEW

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DIGITAL DIVIDE

- **What is Digital Divide?**

- It refers to the gap between those with regular, effective access to digital and information technology, and those without this access.

- With digitization, the internet has become a very important means of communication and information acquisition.

- This is evident from the fact that during the global pandemic like COVID-19 the task of providing administrative support to the affected people was being done effectively through the digital medium.

- Help through digital means as a helpline number or through Arogya Setu app was useful in the direction of public concern and health.

- Access to digital technology has emerged as a powerful tool for millions of citizens in this global crisis.

- Even though the uses and importance of Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are increasing, dramatically, the gap of the digital divide is also persisting at an alarming rate.

TYPES OF DIGITAL DIVIDE IN INDIA

1. The Digital Divide, also called the digital split, is a social issue referring to the gap that exists between individuals who have access to modern information and communication technology and those who lack access.

2. It represents the disparities between demographics and regions at different social, economic levels or other categories over the use of Internet and communication technologies.

3. The digital divide can exist between those living in rural areas and those living in urban areas, between the educated and uneducated, between economic classes, and on a global scale between more and less industrially developed nations.

DIGITAL DIVIDE – TYPES

- There are numerous types of digital divide that influence access to Information and Communication Technologies.
- Some of the vivid gaps in digital inequality include:

Gender Divide –

- The internet gender gap is striking especially in developing countries. Though mobile connectivity is spreading drastically, it is not spreading equally.
- Women are still lagging. Men are 90% more likely to own a mobile phone than women.
- Even among women owning mobile phones they have no access to internet connectivity.

CASE STUDIES

"Girls should not be given phones as it leads to rapes," says UP Women's Commission member (India Today, The Hindu, Mirror Now Digital, India Times)

Agra (June, 2021): A member of Uttar Pradesh Women's Commission has made a shocking statement that reeks of outright patriarchy. The woman member allegedly said that girls should not be given mobile devices as it leads to rapes.

She also appealed to parents that they should keep their daughters away from mobile phones.

"Girls talks with boys and later run away with them," a report in Times of India quoted Meena Kumari as saying. She made the controversial remarks during a public hearing of complaints related to women in Aligarh district on Wednesday.

Kumari's comment was in response to a question about sharp rise in alleged rape cases in the state. Kumari did not stop at this. She also urged the parents especially mothers to monitor their daughters as their careless attitude leads to crimes against women.

IN INDIA ONLY 38% OF WOMEN USE MOBILE PHONES, WHILE IT IS 71% FOR MEN: STUDY
(NATIONAL HERALD, 2018)

A Harvard Kennedy School study has estimated that, today in India, 71% of men use mobile phones, as against 38% of women, pointing out that India, along with Pakistan and Bangladesh, are "clear outliers among countries of similar levels of development", exhibiting "some of the world's highest gender gaps in access to technology".

The study provides a comparative graph which suggests that, while Pakistan and Bangladesh "outstrips" India in gender gap in mobile ownership, the only country outside the South Asian region, where the gap is even higher, is Uganda.

2019

- **Gujarat Community Bans Mobiles For Single Women, Will Fine Inter-Caste Marriages**

- **Thakor community bans cellphones for unmarried women in Gujarat villages**

- **Gujarat village bans mobile phones for unmarried girls to prevent them from 'violating society norms'**

- In a community meeting in Jalol village in Banaskantha, Gujarat, some "crucial" decisions were taken. The decisions involved banning the use of mobile phones by unmarried girls. As though the mere announcement was not regressive enough, it was declared that use of mobile phones by unmarried girl will constitute a crime. Not just this, any girl marrying without parents' consent will also be a crime and the girl's father will have to pay up Rs 1.5 lakh.

GIRLS AND UNMARRIED WOMEN IN INDIA BANNED FROM USING MOBILE PHONES TO PREVENT 'DISTURBANCE IN SOCIETY'

KAYLEIGH LEWIS MONDAY 22 FEBRUARY 2016 13:42

- A village in Gujarat has reportedly banned women from using or possessing mobile phones - with the threat of fines for those caught in the act.

- As of 12 February, women in Suraj village face fines of Rs 2,100, around £21.60, for breaking the new rules, while informers can receive a reward of Rs 200 (£2).

- The average daily wage in India is Rs 193 (£2), although 250 million people live below the poverty line earning just Rs 86 (90p) per day.

- According to the *Hindustan Times,* village head Devshi Vankar said: "Why do girls need cell phone? Internet is a waste of time and money for a middle-class community like us.

- "Girls should better utilise their time for study and other works."

- Meanwhile, the *Times of India* reports **the panchayat of Aligarh, a village in Agra, has announced a complete ban on mobile phones for girls under 18.**

- Parents of those who break the rules will reportedly be forced to sweep 500m of village roads for five days in punishment, the paper reports, or pay a fine of Rs 1,000 (around £10).

- Panchayat coordinator Ramveer Singh told the website: "Girls get spoiled and get involved in relationships with boys at a young age because they use phones.

- According to the *Times of India*, Barmer, a Rajasthan village, banned girls from using mobiles last year, while Muzaffarnagar, a city in Uttar Pradesh, forbade girls and young women from mobile phones, jeans and other so-called western items in 2014.

- The Prime Minister launched Digital India, an initiative to improve online infrastructure and increase internet connectivity to ensure all citizens have access to government services, in July 2015.

- One of the nine pillars of this initiative is 'universal access to mobile connectivity'.

Social Digital Divide –

- Internet access creates relationships and social circles among people with shared interests.

- Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, etc. create online peer groups based on similar interests.

- Internet usage has created social stratification which is evident among those that are connected to the internet and those that are not.

- Non-connected groups are sidelined since they don't share in the internet benefits of the connected groups.

Access Digital Divide – The main barriers under this point are lack of telecommunication infrastructure with sufficient reliable bandwidth for Internet connections and cost, the ability to purchase, rent without financial hardship and the necessary equipment. This results in lack of access to technology.

Other Digital Divide – This includes inequality in the usage of digital technologies due to lack of ICTs (Information Communication Technology) skill or support, due to physical disability, cultural and behavioural attitudes towards technology like computers, mobile etc. are difficult to use or belong to a brainy people etc.

DIGITAL DIVIDE IN INDIA – FACETS

- The digital divide exists despite the increase in the number of wireless subscribers in India over the past few years. A few facets are as mentioned below-

- **The Urban-Rural divide** – the digital divide between India's rural and urban areas during the lockdown is not just highlighted in Education but is evident everywhere be **it telemedicine, e-commerce, banking, e-governance,** all of which became accessible only through the internet during the lockdown.

- Services such as online classrooms, financial transactions and e-governance require access to the internet as well as the ability to operate internet-enabled devices like phones, tablets and computers.

- As per the report by National Statistical Office (NSO), most of the Internet-enabled homes are located in cities, where 42% have Internet access. In rural India, however, only 15% are connected to the internet.

- Across India, only one in ten households have a computer — whether a desktop, laptop or tablet.

- Almost 25% of all homes have Internet facilities, accessed via a fixed or mobile network using any device, including smartphones.

- The urban-rural disparity of digital divide is evident from the internet penetration in the country.

- As per the NSO, there is less than 20% Internet penetration, even in States with software hubs such as Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

- **Gender Digital inequalities** –

- India has among the world's highest gender gaps in access to digital technology. Only 21% of women in India in comparison to 42% of men are mobile internet users, according to GSMA's 2020 mobile gender gap report.

- The report says, while 79% of men own a mobile phone in India where the number for women is 63%.

- While there are economic barriers to girls' owning a mobile phone or laptop, cultural and social norms also play a major part.

- The male-female gap in mobile use often exacerbates (aggravates) other inequalities for women, including access to information, economic opportunities, and networking.

- **Regional Digital Divide and Intra-State Digital inequality** –

- In terms of people that have access to computers or in the know-how to use the internet, States too greatly differ in the matrices.

- Southern states are more digitally literate than Northern counterparts. Kerala is the state where the difference between rural and urban areas is the least.

- Uttarakhand has the most number of computers in urban areas, while Kerala has the most number of computers in rural areas.

- Himachal Pradesh leads the country in access to the internet in both rural and urban areas.

- While the national capital has the highest Internet access, with 55% of homes having such facilities, Odisha is at the bottom with only one in ten homes having Internet.

- Talking about Intra-state divide – While urban areas are more digitally literate, rural counterpart are lacking in the respective states.

- Kerala has the least inequality with more than 39% of the poorest rural homes having Internet, in comparison to 67% of the richest urban homes.

- Assam shows the striking inequality, with almost 80% of the richest urban homes having the Internet access and 94% of those in the poorest rural homes in the State don't have the access.

- **Disparity due to literacy/digital literacy** –

- Having Internet access is no guarantee that one can use it.

- 20% of Indians above the age of 5 years had basic digital literacy.

- Just 40% in the critical age group of 15 to 29 years, which includes all high school and college students as well as young parents responsible for teaching younger children.

- More than one in five Indians above 7 years still cannot read and write in any language.

- Over the last decade, literacy rates have increased from 71.7% to 77.7%, with the highest gains coming among rural women.

- A State-wise split of literacy rates also throws up some unexpected results.

- Andhra Pradesh has the country's lowest literacy rate, at just 66.4%, significantly lower than less developed States such as Chhattisgarh (77.3%), Jharkhand (74.3%), Uttar Pradesh (73%), and Bihar (70.9%).

- Kerala remains at the top of the pile with 96.2% literacy, followed by three northern States: Delhi (88.7%), Uttarakhand (87.6%) and Himachal Pradesh (86.6%).

- **Linguistic Digital Divide**:

- More than 80% of the content on the Internet is in English, so states, where people are more competent in English, are more digitally competent.

- Digital Divide in India − Effects/Implications

Educational: The digital divide in India will affect the capacity of children to learn and develop.

-Without Internet access, students cannot build the required technology-related skills.

Social: Internet penetration is associated with greater social progress of a nation.

-Thus digital divide in a way hinders the social progress of a country.

-Rural population is suffering from lack of information due to the Digital divide in India, this will only strengthen the vicious cycle of poverty, deprivation, and backwardness.

- **Political**: In the age of social media, political empowerment and mobilization are difficult without digital connectivity.

- **Economic**: The digital divide will increase economic inequality between those who can afford the technology and those who don't.

- **Governance**: Transparency and accountability are dependent on digital connectivity. The digital divide affects e-governance initiatives negatively.

GOVERNMENT INITIATIVE TO BRIDGE DIGITAL DIVIDE IN INDIA

- The Government of India is taking significant steps towards acquiring competence in information and technology to cope with India's Digital Divide.

- **1.Digital India Initiatives** by Government to improve internet access in the country. A few initiatives under this are –

- In 2011, the BharatNet project was launched to connect 0.25 million panchayats through an optical fibre (100 MBPS) and connect India's villages.

- In 2014, the government launched the National Digital Literacy Mission and the Digital Saksharta Abhiyan.

- In 2015, the government launched several schemes under its Digital India campaign to connect the entire country.

- **PM Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyan**, launched in 2017, to usher in digital literacy in rural India by covering 60 million households.

2. Seeing the importance of **digital literacy,** the Supreme Court of India has declared **the right to access to the Internet as a fundamental right**, making it a part of the right to privacy and the right to education that comes under Article 21 of the Constitution.

3. National Education Policy, 2020 aims at making "India a global knowledge superpower" by introducing several changes from the school to college level in the Indian education system with special emphasis on digital education.

- **3. Internet Saathi Program –** The Internet Saathi Program was launched in 2015 by Google India and Tata Trusts. The aim of this project is to facilitate digital literacy among rural Indian women.

- **5. Optical Fibre Network (NOF-N)**, a project aimed to ensure broadband connectivity to over two lakh (200,000) gram panchayats of India.

- **6. DIKSHA (Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing) platform-** DIKSHA is the national platform for school education available for all states and the central government for grades 1 to 12 and was launched in September 2017. As part of **PM eVidya announced under the Atma Nirbhar Bharat programme, DIKSHA is the 'one nation; one digital platform' for school education in India.**

- **7. Unnati Project –** Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited (HPCL) which strives to bridge the digital divide in schools by giving the rural students with poor economic and social background access to computer education.

- **8. Gyandoot** is an Intranet-based Government to Citizen (G2C) service delivery initiative started in the Dhar district of Madhya Pradesh in January 2000 with the twin objective of providing relevant information to the rural population and acting as an interface between the district administration and the people.

- **9. Digital Mobile Library:** In order to bridge the digital divide in a larger way the government of India, in collaboration with the Centre for Advanced Computing (C–DAC) based in Pune.

- **10. Online Massive Open Online Course MOOC** courses relating to NIOS (grades 9 to 12 of open schooling) are uploaded on SWAYAM portal; around 92 courses have started and 1.5 crore students are enrolled.

- **11. On Air Shiksha Vani,** DAISY by NIOS for differently-abled, e-Pathshala- Radio broadcasting is being used for children in remote areas who are not online (especially for grades 1 to 5).

- **12. E-pathshala:** For rural and urban students and providing them with study materials.

- **Way Forward – Digital Divide**

- **1. Infrastructure development**: The promotion of indigenous Information and Communication Technologies development under Atmanirbhar Abhiyan can play a significant role.

- Promotion of budget mobile phones is the key, we should explore migration to new technologies like 5G.

- It would resolve some of the bandwidth challenges. The creation of market competition between service providers may make services cheaper.

- Efficient spectrum allocation in large contiguous blocks should be explored.

- **2. Promoting Digital Literacy:** Digital literacy needs special attention at the school/college level. The National Digital Literacy Mission should focus on introducing digital literacy at the primary school level in all government schools for basic content and in higher classes and colleges for advanced content. Higher digital literacy will also increase the adoption of computer hardware across the country. Furthermore, when these students will educate their family members, it will create multiplier effects.

- **3. Promotion of Regional Language:** State governments should pay particular attention to content creation in the Indian regional languages, particularly those related to government services. Natural language processing (NLP) in Indian languages needs to be promoted.

- **4. TRAI** **(Telecom Regulatory Authority of India)** should consider putting in place a credible system. This system will track call drops, weak signals, and outages. It ensures the quality and reliability of telecom services.

- **5. Cyber Security:** MeitY (Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology) will need to evolve a comprehensive cyber-security framework for data security, safe digital transactions, and complaint redressal.

- **6. Telecom ombudsman:** The government should appoint officials and also set up a telecom ombudsman for the grievances redressal.

- **7. Role of regulators:** Regulators should minimize entry barriers by reforming licensing, taxation, spectrum allocation norms.

*Ombudsman- a government official who deals with complaints made by ordinary people against public organizations

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