

## Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Legal Research

# Tenebrosity of the Divide – Assessing the impacts of Digital Divide with respect to the COVID-19 pandemic

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“It is dangerously destabilizing to have half the world on the cutting edge of technology while the other half struggles on the bare edge of survival.” - William J. Clinton

### **ABSTRACT**

Existing literatures have focussed on the meaning of digital divide and its effect under normal circumstances. With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic however, it has become very important to reflect on the consequences that this divide has had on people all across the world during the pandemic. Until now, digital divide meant a gap in awareness but the Corona pandemic has overturned its meaning and has made it more severe than it ever was. It is now leading to people losing their jobs, students not being able to study and people having to give up on their careers all because of absence of digital access.<sup>1</sup> This might in the future, give rise to and promote elitist tendencies. The impact of digital divide is far too serious in the virus-infected world and cannot be overlooked<sup>2</sup>.

Before moving forward, it is very important to firstly understand the meaning of Digital Divide, its types and why despite of an overall increase in gizmos, does the divide still persist.

### **INTRODUCTION**

We live in a world of similarities and contrasts; in a world which prides itself on its diversity but prefers uniformity. On one hand each social group is a complete unit, there are sections of this group which are left on the side-lines and are viewed differently from the rest of the group. These sections lag far behind the rest of their groups in their progress. With the onset of the Information Technology revolution, this has become one of the key areas of debate in society.

<sup>1</sup> As digital divide widens, India risks losing a generation to pandemic disruption, , <https://theprint.in/india/education/as-digital-divide-widens-india-risks-losing-a-generation-to-pandemic-disruption/568394/> (last visited Jul 13, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> COVID-19 exposed the digital divide. Here's how we can close it, , WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM , <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/01/covid-digital-divide-learning-education/> (last visited Jul 13, 2021).

The ever-increasing permeation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in all walks of life and business makes it an appropriate vehicle for bringing about social and economic growth. However, if some sections of the society have access to these technologies and others don't, the gap between the rich and poor; educated and uneducated; will tend to rise and lead the 'have nots' feel alienated.

### **WHAT IS DIGITAL DIVIDE?**

The digital divide is the gap that exists between individuals who have access to modern information and communication technology and those who lack access.<sup>3</sup> Digital inequality is clearly spottable between urban and rural areas; developed and less-developed countries; different socioeconomic groups; educated and the less educated, etc. The following are the major branches and types of digital divide:

- **Gender Divide-** This refers to the fact that women in less developed and under developed countries have a lower likeliness of having access to technology, as compared to men. According to a 2013 report<sup>4</sup>, the internet gender gap is striking especially in developing countries. Although mobile connectivity is spreading drastically, it's not spreading equally.
- **Social Divide-** Access to internet leads to contacts and relationships. Now that accessibility and social media exposure is increasing, it is leading to a gap between the 'haves' and the 'have nots'.
- **Universal Access Divide-** This refers to the lack of access of digital gadgets to the physically disadvantaged in a country. Even though computers, internet access and even literacy is increasing at a rapid rate, the divide still remains to be drastic.

### **WHY THE DIVIDE?**

Although the number of Indian citizens having access to electronics and internet is increasing every day, the strength of citizens who still are not in possession of ICTs is alarming. On one hand is a section which has complete access and is upgrading to better and more complex technologies. On the other hand, are the people who are lagging behind big time. This section not only lacks means and awareness, but also does lack education and information regarding the accessibility. The two major factors contributing to this divide are- Education and Income.

- **Education:** Widening levels of education is major a reason behind the magnified digital divide in any civilization. It can be easily observed that people belonging to a better educated and a well-informed family have an easy access to digital comfort than the uneducated ones. A study conducted by NTIA<sup>5</sup> from 1997 to 1998 determined that the gap in computer usage and internet access widened 7.8% and 25% respectively between those with the most and the least education.
- **Income:** Not surprisingly enough, there is a direct relation between digital access and income levels. The level of household income plays a significant role in determining the divide. Again, the study by NTIA stated, "In the last years, the divide between the

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<sup>3</sup> Carmen Steele, *What is the Digital Divide?*, DIGITAL DIVIDE COUNCIL (2019), <http://www.digitaldividecouncil.com/what-is-the-digital-divide/> (last visited Jul 13, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> Home Page | National Telecommunications and Information Administration, , <https://www.ntia.doc.gov/> (last visited Jul 13, 2021).

highest and lowest income groups grew 29%.”<sup>6</sup> It can be said that households earning a stable income have a better and fair probability of having an internet connection. This is one of the reasons why internet access in rural areas is less than the access in urban counterparts (incomes in rural areas being comparatively less<sup>7</sup>).

These educational and monetary gaps among citizens further form the basis of difference in opportunities and difference in status of life.

### ***DIGITAL DIVIDE BEFORE THE PANDEMIC***

A few years back, digital divide was a social problem. It was considered to be a divide that was paving a path towards an elitist society. Digital divide was responsible for the drastically increasing pothole between the rich and the poor. The rich became richer with the technology and the poor still lacked a basic access. Ramesh, a class 10 student, studies in a government school in India because his parents can not afford the fancy private schools. So, not only does he have no access to top-notch teachers, but also does not have any online sources for the clarification of his doubts. His rich counterpart however, has access to all the online sources and opportunities. This lack of information and no experience with modern or even basic technologies, sets Ramesh far behind the students who have all of it.

The above stated is a real-life example of what the divide felt like before the pandemic. Ramesh, without having any fault of his own, witnessed the gap and further became a victim of it. In today's world of digital advances, with most of the updates and opportunities being available online, we (the haves) can't even begin to imagine the plight of the people who do not have access to the ICTs. In a developing country like that of India, where the technology is not available even to some males of the society, the probability of the availability of these technologies to women is negligible. The gender digital divide in access to the internet remains largest in the world's least developed countries. This divide is most pronounced in South Asian countries, where women are 26% less likely to own a mobile as compared to men<sup>8</sup>.

Digital divide before the pandemic was just another concept that was talked about by the people who already had access to the ICTs. With the advent of the COVID-19 virus, the arguments and the consequences are toppling. The effect now, has been felt more than it ever was. The divide has, in the current scenario, emerged to be an issue of urgency and quick redressal.

### ***DIGITAL DIVIDE AND COVID-19***

India witnessed the largest containment experiment in history, when – on 25 March – its 1.3 billion citizens battened down their hatches in an attempt to flatten the Covid – 19 curves.<sup>9</sup> During these tough times, all the attention was diverted towards the healthcare centre, leaving

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<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> India's rural-urban divide: Village worker earns less than half of city peer, , THE FINANCIAL EXPRESS (2019), <https://www.financialexpress.com/economy/indias-rural-urban-divide-village-worker-earns-less-than-half-of-city-peer/1792245/> (last visited Jul 13, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Bridging the gender digital divide, , PLAN INTERNATIONAL , <https://plan-international.org/education/bridging-the-digital-divide> (last visited Jul 15, 2021).

<sup>9</sup> India lockdown: First lockdown announced | The Economic Times, , <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/one-year-since-a-complete-lockdown-was-announced-we-look-back-on-how-india-fought-covid/first-lockdown-announced/slideshow/81662838.cms> (last visited Jul 11, 2021).

everything else to its fate. The pandemic was and still remains to be very stressful for all, but the impact that it had on the economically weaker sections and women was horrendous. The pandemic and hence the lockdown, not only threatened to take a toll on our physical health, but also majorly on our mental health.<sup>10</sup> The amalgamation of unlimited work from home hours, the lack of personal space in the house, inability to go out and relax and a number of other reasons promised to lead to severe mental health issues. The sudden shift of everything to online platforms, and a resultant boost in the screen timing has led to problems like short temper, irritation and hopelessness. We can't even think of imagining the number of sleepless nights that the marginalized, poor and mediocre families lived through<sup>11</sup>. Job, livelihood, survival, and just every other thing at stake.

The issue of digital divide, during these times of international emergencies, has become more severe than ever before. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the dark hole of Indian digital divide and brought in front of the administrators, its urgency<sup>12</sup>. Its impact has varied from section to section and thus, needs to be addressed individually.

### ***Digital Divide and Students***

No one in their wildest dreams, had imagined that the entire world will suddenly be crammed inside their houses all at once. With complete absence of access to the outside world, several sections of the society were exposed to hell. These conditions did not only lead to burnt economies, increased crime rates and increased death rates, but also widened the digital divide like never before. This deepened impact of the divide was felt by students among other sections.

- i. The sudden shift of all the functions and institutions to an online mode, was not easy for all. The ***commencement of classes online***<sup>13</sup> posed a hopeless question in front of students belonging to deprived and underprivileged classes. Not all sections in the Indian community were in possession of expensive gizmos and this further forced them to give up on their studies. Seeing their 'richer' friends attend schools everyday and earn credits, it can be understood that the students weren't really in a good place. The feeling of their classmates succeeding just because they were rich and could afford everything they want, made the students vulnerable<sup>14</sup>.
  - For instance, in the Indian state of Kerala (which is viewed as the epitome of knowledge, education and development) a class 10 school topper was found dead because of the dire family conditions<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Mental health and COVID-19, , <https://www.who.int/teams/mental-health-and-substance-use/covid-19> (last visited Jul 15, 2021).

<sup>11</sup> Koustav Das New Delhi May 28, 2020 UPDATED: May 28 & 2020 18:06 Ist, *Hunger, poverty and jobs: India's poor pay heavy price in fight against coronavirus*, INDIA TODAY , <https://www.indiatoday.in/business/story/coronavirus-impact-india-poor-population-poverty-unemployment-hunger-economic-crisis-recession-1682890-2020-05-28> (last visited Jul 15, 2021).

<sup>12</sup> Digital Divide Among Students During COVID-19 Pandemic Discussed In Lok Sabha, , NDTV.COM , <https://www.ndtv.com/education/mps-highlight-digital-divide-among-students-during-pandemic> (last visited Jul 17, 2021).

<sup>13</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has changed education forever. This is how, , WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM , <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-education-global-covid19-online-digital-learning/> (last visited Jul 17, 2021).

<sup>14</sup> The impact of COVID-19 on student equity and inclusion: Supporting vulnerable students during school closures and school re-openings, , <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-student-equity-and-inclusion-supporting-vulnerable-students-during-school-closures-and-school-re-openings-d593b5c8/> (last visited Jul 17, 2021).

<sup>15</sup> Digital Divide Among Students During COVID-19 Pandemic Discussed In Lok Sabha, *supra* note 12.

- A student from the most esteemed university in the country committed suicide because her family was not in a position to provide her a laptop or a mobile phone, which prevented her from attending her college.
- A girl from Haryana committed suicide because her family could not afford a stable internet connection and thus, she was incapable of turning her assignments on time. Her teacher as a result, told her that she was not eligible to sit for the semester exams.

There are end number of examples and instances where students, having a simple goal of pursuing higher education had to succumb to the rising elitism in the society brought about by the pandemic. These students, with no fault of their own, decided that the stress put by the pandemic on them and on their families was unbearable and it was better surrendering to it. These warriors lost their lives fighting for their right to education, fighting for equal opportunity and fighting for a chance to improve.

The student related problems, however, do not end here.

- ii. In these deadly conditions, *examinations were conducted online* and absence from these examinations due to any reasons whatsoever, lead to a drop in the grades. Now how is a student, with zero access to internet, supposed to show up and maintain his grades? Taking in consideration, the recently released the class 12 evaluation and moderation policy<sup>16</sup>, a major role was assigned to the scores of internal examinations. The examinations were cancelled on a very generous consideration that due to COVID-19 exams could not be conducted offline and they even couldn't be conducted online as well because not all students had access to internet. The policy makers however, did not seem to realise the fact that even the internal examinations were accessed online<sup>17</sup>. There's no data on how the students who earlier had no access to internet, suddenly became eligible to give internal examinations online. Apart from the class 12 students, there were many other student groups who could not give their final term exams due to digital absence. Many of these students were marked as absent and thus now, have to repeat their academic year once again to proceed. This system is highly unfavourable for the poor and deprived section. We might not notice the consequences of the system now; but in the years to come, we will notice a vicious cycle of lack of education and a resultant lack in job opportunities<sup>18</sup>.
- iii. Drifting a bit apart from the educational front, it is also very important to realise the effect of the *lockdown on student's mental health*. The pandemic has induced a sense of fear and anxiety all across the globe. This has led to both short term and long-term mental health implications on students and adolescents. There are more than 2.2 billion children in the world who constitute approximately 28% of the world's population. Those aged between 10 to 19 years make up 16 % of the world's population. COVID-

<sup>16</sup> SCHEME OF EXAMINATIONS AND PASS CRITERIA.pdf, , [https://www.cbse.gov.in/cbsenew/Exambylaws\\_archive/SCHEME%20OF%20EXAMINATIONS%20AND%20PASS%20CRITERIA.pdf](https://www.cbse.gov.in/cbsenew/Exambylaws_archive/SCHEME%20OF%20EXAMINATIONS%20AND%20PASS%20CRITERIA.pdf) (last visited Jul 17, 2021).

<sup>17</sup> CBSE Class-XII practical, internal exams to be conducted online, , <https://www.prameyanews.com/cbse-class-xii-practical-internal-exam-to-be-conducted-online/> (last visited Jul 17, 2021).

<sup>18</sup> The coronavirus pandemic is creating 2 major problems in education, but there aren't as many downsides as upsides | Business Insider India, , <https://www.businessinsider.in/education/news/the-coronavirus-pandemic-is-creating-2-major-problems-in-education-but-there-arent-as-many-downsides-as-upsides/articleshow/75852495.cms> (last visited Jul 17, 2021).

19 has impacted the lives of people around the world including children and adolescents in an unprecedented manner<sup>19</sup>. It has been indicated that compared to adults, the pandemic may continue to have increased long term adverse consequences on children and adolescents<sup>20</sup>. The nature and extent of impact depends on a variety of other factors like developmental age, pre- existing mental health issues, economic conditions and others.

- *Impact on young children:* Stress starts showing its adverse effect on a child even before he or she is born. During stress, parents particularly pregnant mothers are in a psychologically vulnerable state to experience anxiety and depression which is biologically linked to the wellbeing of the foetus<sup>21</sup>. For young children and adolescents too, the pandemic has been dreadful. Instances of them facing anxiety, alienation, vulnerable have increased in the era of the pandemic.
- *Impact on college and school going students:* In the pre-pandemic era, students were used to one-on-one learning and that is what seemed to work out the best for them. However, because of the virus infliction, the attention paid to students has decreased significantly. The nationwide closure of schools and colleges has negatively impacted over 91% of world's student population<sup>22</sup>. The home confinement of these students has attributed to a great deal of stress, hopelessness and even lack of opportunities. Some children have depicted utter disheartenment for not being able to meet their friends and classmates every day. These very students have now developed clingy and attention seeking habits towards their parents<sup>23</sup>.  
It has even been established that once schools and colleges reopen, students might even have to face problems regarding rapport formation, interaction or even confidence building in some cases.
- *Impact on adolescents with special needs:* There are about 1 in every 6 children within the age group of 2-8 years who have some or the other neurodevelopmental, behavioural or emotional difficulty<sup>24</sup>. These children with special needs, like that of autism, ADHD, learning disabilities, etc, encounter huge challenges during the pandemic world. With the closure of special schools and day care centres these children lack access to resource material, peer group interactions and opportunities of learning and developing important social and behavioural skills in due time may lead to regression to the past behaviour as they lose anchor in life, as a result of this their symptoms could relapse.

<sup>19</sup> • Global population of children 2100 | Statista, , <https://www.statista.com/statistics/678737/total-number-of-children-worldwide/> (last visited Jul 17, 2021).

<sup>20</sup> Kunling Shen et al., *Diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of 2019 novel coronavirus infection in children: experts' consensus statement*, WORLD J PEDIATR 1–9 (2020).

<sup>21</sup> Alessandra Biaggi et al., *Identifying the women at risk of antenatal anxiety and depression: A systematic review*, 191 J AFFECT DISORD 62–77 (2016).

<sup>22</sup> Joyce Lee, *Mental health effects of school closures during COVID-19*, 4 THE LANCET CHILD & ADOLESCENT HEALTH 421 (2020).

<sup>23</sup> Yusen Zhai & Xue Du, *Mental health care for international Chinese students affected by the COVID-19 outbreak*, 7 THE LANCET PSYCHIATRY e22 (2020).

<sup>24</sup> CDC, *Data and Statistics on Children's Mental Health* | CDC, CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION (2020), <https://www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/data.html> (last visited Jul 17, 2021).

The above discussed are some of the major problems being faced by students across the world due to absence of digital access in the time of a pandemic. There however, are other sections of the society as well; which faced and are still facing problems due to digital inaccessibility.

### ***Digital Divide and Jobs***

The first sector to have witnessed the direct and adverse effect of the pandemic was the *economic sector*<sup>25</sup>. As soon as the pandemic hit, India witnessed a stooping economy that fell every day. As a result, private sector organisations began removing people from their jobs, in order to improve profits and for the company to float through the pandemic. As a result, the brunt of this decision too, was faced by those who could not afford a stable internet connection or up to date technology that meets the criterion of their jobs.

- Companies during these times started firing people and this led many regular salaried employees towards unemployment. Over 122 million people in India lost their jobs in April 2020. The *average employment reduced* from an estimated 404 million during 2019-20 to 396 million in March 2020 and in April, came down to 282 million<sup>26</sup>.
- People who were employed as teaches of art and craft, personality development, music, dance and physical education; suddenly lost their jobs as there was no requirement of these disciplines in the online mode. Mr. Manik, an arts and crafts teacher at a high school in Haryana, lost his job in the pandemic and being the sole wage earner in the family, this proved to be a devastating time for him. Not only was he forced to do petty paid internships here and there, he also had to get out of the house in the deadly conditions, just to support his family.

The divide has proved to be the reason for lacks of unemployed citizens of the country and has led to suicides all over the country. The divide made fully educated but poor and underprivileged people unemployed. All the money spent on education sees no future of bearing fruits due to the massive unavailability of digital technology.

### ***Digital Divide and Gender Equality***

Technology is meant to be a “*great equaliser, not a source of division*,” said Ravi Shankar Prasad.

- Women in India have limited access to technology, especially mobile phones and internet. The data says it all: according to the *mobile gender gap report 2020*<sup>27</sup>, 20% less women own mobile phones than men in India. Worryingly enough, the gap between men and women when it comes to internet users, is the lowest in the world. Most women (especially in rural settings), have shared phones and even no phones at all.

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<sup>25</sup> SBI Life Insurance, *Covid-19 Pandemic: Impact of Coronavirus on Indian Economy | SBI Life*, SBI LIFE INSURANCE, <https://www.sbilife.co.in/en/knowledge-centre/lifestyle-tips-tricks/coronavirus-covid19-impact-indian-economy> (last visited Jul 17, 2021).

<sup>26</sup> The Hindu Data Team, *Data | An estimated 12.2 crore Indians lost their jobs during the coronavirus lockdown in April: CMIE*, THE HINDU, May 7, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/data/data-over-12-crore-indians-lost-their-jobs-during-the-coronavirus-lockdown-in-april/article31520715.ece> (last visited Jul 17, 2021).

<sup>27</sup> GSMA-The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2020.pdf, <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/GSMA-The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2020.pdf> (last visited Jul 17, 2021).

- Even when women and girls do have access to technology, their use is fraught with patriarchal notions. 14% of women in India do have smart phones but beliefs that the internet is a bad thing which will lead our girls to indulge in '*galat kaam*' (wrongdoings) is rampant. '*Family does not approve*' has been one of the hugest reasons mentioned by Asian women<sup>28</sup>.
- Since the first wave of the pandemic, this gender divide of digital technologies has worsened. Staggering impacts of this would be felt in the years to come. Women will face severe inequalities because of this divide. During the pandemic, when all the activities are being carried online and women having less access to digital devices, our nation will lead to straight up patriarchy soon.

The gender inequalities in the digital fields, may seem to be something that does not deserve a lot of attention. Many may feel like there are more important issues left to be addressed, but the severity of this issue is beyond imagination.

## CONCLUSION

In these difficult times, when everyone is striving for survival, technology has emerged to be a great medium. With the advent of the COVID-19, internet and other digital devices have proved to be lifelines for individuals. Everything ranging from tuitions to dance classes, schools to offices, meetings to yoga; everything shifted to the online mode and in such a condition, the people with no access to these devices clearly have no access to the outside world. Absence of the technology for the person in the pandemic would mean an absence of jobs, education, entertainment, opportunities, updates, and every other thing possible. The pandemic without a doubt has had impacts on everyone. Some families lost their loved ones, others saw their drowning businesses. Some saw their kids having to face innumerable problems, while others saw an increase in mental health disruption. The underprivileged had to face all of this and an additional problem as well- the problem of digital absence. 2020 was supposed to be a great year for so many of them. The year when their son gets a job, year when they can finally pay off their debts, year when they might even get promoted. The year 2020 however, led to the fulfilment of the exact opposite of our desires. The fault can not be placed on the times, nor on fortune. The only way of logically looking at this situation is through the lens of public policy and administration.

It is the responsibility of the government to provide equal access of opportunities to all and that in today's era, can only be done through providing access to advanced technologies. The social, gender based and physical filters should be removed from technologies. Extra care should be taken in providing women, the access to technologies. India is a developing country and it needs all its genders together for a higher and longer jump. If the current situations continue, India might end up going years back in its development. It's time for public administrators and policy makers to pull up their socks and implement practical policies with respect to digital divide. It is very important to realise the hideousness that this divide might turn the country into if proper steps are not taken on time. Some efforts have been taken in this direction<sup>29</sup>, but a lot more is still left to be done.

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<sup>28</sup> *Id.*

<sup>29</sup> Top Five Digital Divide Solutions | Digital Divide Council, , <http://www.digitaldividecouncil.com/top-five-digital-divide-solutions/> (last visited Jul 17, 2021).





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