



DIGITAL DIVIDE - GS III MAINS

Q. 'It's time to eradicate the digital divide in India before turning into digital poverty'. Critically analyse the measures taken by India to address the digital divide in India. (15 marks, 250 words)

News: *New scheme to bridge digital divide*

What's in the news?

- The State government has announced the launch of a new scheme aimed at empowering B.Tech. and B.Sc computer science students and contributing to the enhancement of technology education in government schools.

Digital divide:

- Digital divide is any **uneven distribution in the access** to, use of or impact of information and communications technologies between any number of distinct groups, which can be defined based on social, geographical or geopolitical criteria, or otherwise.

Penetrations of digital divide:

1. Gender divide:

- According to 'India Inequality Report 2022: Digital Divide' released by the NGO, **Indian women are 15 percent less likely to own a mobile phone and 33 percent less likely to use mobile internet services than men.**
- In Asia-Pacific, India fares the worst with the widest gender gap of 40.4 percent.

2. Urban-rural divide:

- Despite registering a significant (digital) growth rate of 13 percent in a year, **only 31 percent of the rural population uses the internet compared to 67 percent of their urban counterparts.**
- As much as 99 percent of the rural population did not have a computer post the pandemic - an increase of two percent, while the urban population witnessed an increase of seven percent to 91 percent.

3. Rich-poor divide:

- The digital push driven by the pandemic resulted in India experiencing the largest number of real-time digital transactions in 2021 at 48.6 billion.
- However, the likelihood of a digital payment by the richest 60 percent is four times more than the poorest 40 per cent in India.

4. Caste divide:

- In rural India, the tendency to use formal financial services is **lowest for ST households, followed by SC households and OBC households.**



- The likelihood of access to a computer is more for the General and OBC groups than for the SC and ST populations. The difference between the general category and ST is as high as seven to eight per cent between 2018 and 2021.

Causes for digital divide in India:

1. Lack of infrastructure:

- Being a densely populated country, India needs well established infrastructure to deliver e-services.
- But still there are some rural disconnected regions which are not connected to the internet.

2. Increasing population:

- It is a challenge for a developing country to serve a population of 1.30 billion uniformly.
- Every policy and project that is initiated should be implemented at a large scale keeping the future perspectives in mind.

3. Geographical diversity:

- Rural India is still deprived of the facilities of urban India because of its geographical location.
- It is poorly connected in terms of roads and infrastructural facilities.

4. Illiteracy:

- A large portion is illiterate and cannot operate digital devices. According to census 2011, literacy rate in India is 74.04%.

5. Poverty:

- A large part of the population is fighting for its daily basic needs. They do not bother about high speed devices and digitization and are more worried about food and shelter.

6. Gender discrimination:

- In India, there is huge discrimination among male and female.
- Only 65.46% of Indian women are literate and it is shocking that only 29 percent of Indian internet users are female. This creates a huge gender divide.

7. Lack of participation:

- It is observed that often the rural people are not very much attracted towards the web-based E-Governance services for various reasons.
- Many-a-times they are afraid of the technologies and at times they are even ignorant about the availability of technologies which can help in dealing with their problems.

Impacts of digital divide:

1. Political:

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

2. Governance:

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

3. 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 India is suffering from information poverty due to the digital divide.** It only strengthens the vicious cycle of poverty, deprivation and backwardness.
- The inability to access technology has the potential to increase existing **social exclusions and deprive individuals of essential resources.**
- With the increasing dependence on digital technologies and the internet, the digital divide has ramifications on education, health, mobility, safety, financial inclusion, and every other imaginable aspect of life.

4. Economic:

- The digital divide causes economic inequality between those who can afford the technology and those who don't.
- A direct correlation between a company's access to technological advancements and its overall success in **bolstering the economy.** Thus, the digital divide hinders economic growth of a country.

5. Educational:

- The digital divide is also **impacting the capacity of children to learn and develop.**
- Without Internet access, students cannot build the required tech skills.

6. Inequality:

- Inequality based on caste, religion, gender, class, and location is becoming more prevalent, and this is mirrored in the digital sphere.
- As a result of access **issues to education, health, and other services,** those without devices and the internet become even more marginalized.
- The poor will remain void of crucial information presented online concerning academia, and thus they will always lag, and this may be summed up by poor performance.

Government Initiatives:

1. Bharat Net project:

- The objective of this project is to provide accessible broadband services to citizens and institutions in rural and remote areas with the participation of states and private sector.
- Under the BharatNet project, **more than 2.5 lakh gram panchayats are to be provided high speed broadband through optical fiber at affordable rates. It aims to set broadband speeds from 2 to 20 Mbps.**
- The project was funded by the Universal Service Obligation Fund (USOF). Under this, internet connection was provided free of cost in schools, health centers and skill development centers.

2. Digital Saksharta Abhiyan:

- In 2014, the government launched the National Digital Literacy Mission and the Digital Saksharta Abhiyan.
- The National Digital Literacy Mission has been launched with the objective of **making at least one person digitally literate in every household in India by the year 2020.**



- The project aims to help technically illiterate adults to find their place in a rapidly digitizing world.

3. Digital India Campaign:

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

4. PMGDISHA:

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

5. Kisan Call center:

- The Department of Agriculture & Cooperation launched Kisan Call Centers to **deliver extension services to the farming community.**
- The purpose of these call centers is to respond to issues raised by farmers, instantly, in the local language.

6. TDIL:

- The department of information technology initiated the **TDIL (Technology Development for Indian Languages)** with the aim of developing information processing tools and techniques to facilitate human-machine interaction without language barrier.

7. Digital Library:

- Digital library of India is an ambitious project of IISc and Ministry of communication and information technology, government of India.

8. National Digital Communications Policy, 2018:

- Providing universal broadband connectivity at 50 Mbps speed to every citizen.
- Providing 1 Gbps connectivity to all Gram Panchayats by the year 2020 and 10 Gbps by the year 2022.
- Establishment of National Digital Grid by creating National Fiber Authority.
- To ensure connectivity for areas which are not yet covered.
- Attracting 100 billion dollar investment for the digital communication sector.
- Expanding the Internet of Things (IoT) ecosystem to 5 billion connected devices.
- To create a comprehensive data protection system for digital communication that protects the privacy, autonomy and choice of the person.
- To support India's active participation in the global digital economy.

9. Initiatives of State Government:

- **Sourkaryan and E-Seva:** Project of the government of Andhra Pradesh to provide the facility for a citizen to pay property taxes online.
- **The Gyandoot Project:** It is the first ever project in India for a rural information network in the Dhar district of Madhya Pradesh which has the highest percentage of tribes and dense forest. The project was designed to extend the benefits of information technology to people in rural areas by directly linking the government and villagers through information kiosks.



- **Seva Sindhu:** The Karnataka government launched a digital platform “Seva Sindhu” to address the issues of the common citizens in order to strengthen the ecosystem for government services.

10. Digital Empowerment Foundation:

- It has a digital literacy and mentorship initiative that targets 100 tribal girls across five states to link them with 25 urban women known for their leadership skills or roles. The girls are provided with a smartphone and connectivity.

WAY FORWARD:

1. Infrastructure:

- The promotion of indigenous ICT development under Atmanirbhar Abhiyan can play a significant role. The promotion of budget mobile phones is the key.
- The creation of market competition between service providers may make services cheaper.
- Efficient spectrum allocation in large contiguous blocks should be explored.

2. Digital literacy:

- Digital literacy needs special attention at the school and 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.
- When these students will educate their family members, it will create multiplier effects. Higher digital literacy will also increase the adoption of computer hardware across the country.

3. 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. Role of regulators:

- Regulators should minimize entry barriers by reforming licensing, taxation, spectrum allocation norms.
- TRAI 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.
- The government should also set up a telecom ombudsman for the redress of grievances.

5. Cybersecurity:

- MeitY will need to evolve a comprehensive cybersecurity framework for data security, safe digital transactions, and complaint redressal.

Digital divide is an emerging reality in India and heavy cost to access new technology will set the stage for digital divide i.e., **digital discrimination**. Digital illiteracy is on a constant rise in India. Until a plethora of emerging issues due to digital gaps are not addressed timely, affordable and sustainable internet society will appear as sheer chimera.