DIGITAL DIVIDE AND ITS IMPACT ON EDUCATION SECTOR

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ABSTRACT

During last two years since the outbreak of COVID-19 the education sector has been worse affected. This effect has not only been financial but in the way of imparting education also. In a country like India where there are different demographic situations on the basis of finance, culture, attire, language, geography and access to modern resources, COVID wreathed havoc on education system in higher institutes. All of sudden shift from traditional system of teaching to altogether new platform for online teaching rendered many in sheer confusion. Ostensibly all the students do not have equal access to the paraphernalia for online classes so it should have affected different students groups differently. This paper will try to evaluate the impact of digital divide on education.

Key words: Digital Divide, Higher Education, Teaching, Demography

INTRODUCTION

Before March 2020 no one would have thought that the educational institutes which were supposed to impart education would seize to do that. Something unprecedented happened around the world in form of a deadly disease named COVID-19 and forced maximum of the institutes to shut down. Since educational institutes would be buzzing with lively crowd of students so it was thought that they come in a vulnerable category to get infected with the disease hence their closure was necessary. But a new situation has arisen before the stakeholders of education system that was how not to get education affected due to these circumstances. In the wake of the fact that class room teaching is not going to be there for a long period of time then what should be the best alternative to save education. Even the most panglossian temperament would have troubled finding some good in these times.

The people in education sector strived hard to get some platforms where all the students could gather and interact with one another just like they would do in their class rooms. Absence of an age old tradition in teaching left all into an empty space which was to be filled with some kind of platform accessible to all and accessible by all. This was a worldwide situation of education sector when the educationists were finding it hard to reach to their students.

In India also the stakeholders of education were feeling this crunch. There was only one way to come out of this cope up with the situation that was to use online techniques to impart education. And these techniques were to be used at a very big platform because the needs of students from all over India were to be catered. So all of a sudden the shifting from traditional education system and ways to new techniques for education started at a large scale.

This was considered as a ray of hope for education in our country. Higher education departments across the country issued notifications for the educational institutes to take classes online. Same was done by the boards of education dealing with the school education. Now the question arises whether all were ready for these adaptations? Were we enough resourceful to be able to convert to altogether new platform to impart education in the wake of the fact that a large number of students do not have access to internet or mobile gadgets or better signals range? Educationists suddenly became so optimistic as if the face of current education system in our country would be turned overnight. It is also a reality that many resourceful institutes adapted to the new platform without wasting time. A new concept was brooded over that was **Blended Education**. No doubt change was inevitable in education also but a sudden shift onto a different platform could not have yielded good results.

DIGITAL DIVIDE

The idea of this paper is not to defenestrate the shift and change but all the merits along with demerits should also have been considered. The important problem that came across and hasn't been talked much about is the **Digital Divide.** Digital Divide means the uneven distribution of 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. According to an article of Borgen Magazine "The digital divide denies half the world's citizens access to digital education, work and participation in modern life. Without internet access, people in often vulnerable situations are suffering throughout pandemic-driven school and work closures. Stable internet access also makes up-to-date information regarding the COVID-19 pandemic consistently attainable. This includes crucial information such as regional infection rates, locations of testing centers and hospital or urgent care hours.

In India, the digital divide is especially present and has further deepened because of conditions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The nation has the second-largest internet user base in the world with more than 630 million subscribers. It also has the lowest mobile data prices offered anywhere. Despite this, for every Indian citizen with an internet subscription, there is a citizen in a rural area who lacks one. Considering 66% of the population lives in rural areas, there is a sizeable percentage of the country's people living in regions where internet access is minimal. Marginalized and vulnerable communities, especially those living in poverty, could benefit the most from the connectivity and opportunities digital technology provides. By closing the gap in digital access between rural and urban communities in India, the nation will be able to develop and progress more efficiently as a whole."[1]

Though India claims to be the second largest internet user in the world but it has failed to reach the remotest area. This digital divide is further divide into three categories: (1) Gender Divide, (2) Social Divide (3) Universal Access Divide.

(1) **Gender Divide** is that whether electronic gadgets have access to all the genders of the society. Do the girls and women enjoy the same liberty as the boys and men do enjoy in terms of mobile phones and their usage? According to Financial Express "India's digital divide remains huge as more than 400 million people don't have access to the internet. Also, spatial digital divide is huge (internet density in rural areas is lower than in urban areas), as is gender digital divide (far fewer women have access to smartphones than men)."[2]

(2) **Social Digital Divide** refers to the growing gap between the underprivileged members of society, especially the poor, rural, elderly, and handicapped portion of the population who do not have access to electronic gadgets and the internet; and the wealthy, middle-class, and Indians living in urban and suburban areas who have access.[3]

(3) **Universal Access Divide** refers to segregation of some parts of the world from the internet and its vast potential due to lack of digital literacy skills, low education levels, and inadequate broadband infrastructure.

Education is particularly a pungent example of how the different populations can come into conflict over the introduction of new technologies. By exploring the use of internet for the purpose of education among the students in India we can get clarity into how the institutional tensions around technology can intervene in their smooth adoption. In this case the faculties appear to be perennially playing catch-up to the technology, while the students are often dissatisfied and bored with the technological options.

IMPACT OF DIGITAL DIVIDE IN INDIA

In an overpopulated country like India one can find all these three divides. Education will certainly suffer until we mitigate these divides. Education in India has been deeply affected by digital divide due to COVID-19 situation. According to an article published online "A total of 320 million learners in India have been adversely affected and transitioned to the e-learning industry, which comprises a network of 1.5 million schools. An NSSO 2014 report highlights that 32 million children were already out of school before the pandemic — the majority of them belonging to the socially disadvantaged class in the country."[4]

We have already discussed that India boasts its second largest internet user status but that does not mean that all can use it for other purposes than using it for facebook, whatsapp, instagram. Using internet for study does not only involve an electronic gadget and access to internet. It also requires electricity, power backup, a dedicated SIM to be used solely for study purpose, money for internet packs. Now since the pandemic has put everything in crunch so has happened with the jobs of thousands and lacks of people. Many have been rendered jobless. Since they do not have regular flow of money now it is impossible for them to arrange these many things for their kids. Situation in the higher education is also not very different.

Teaching in higher education institutes does not only include class room teaching it also includes some hands on practice in forms of practices to be performed in dedicated labs. Online teaching can be somewhat sufficient to teach theoretical items prescribed for the syllabus of the students but that is also to the level of faculty. Students can

teach theoretical items prescribed for the syllabus of the students but that is also to the level of faculty. Students can raise some objections to their level of satisfaction. Moreover the transmission of online classes depends on the viability of financial conditions of any institute that what kind of platform is being used for the online classes. A strong financial capacity of an institute will have better platform for classes. But we cannot forget the fact that all educational institutes across India do not enjoy same financial capacities. Moreover the gap between urban facilities and rural inadequacies can never be bridged and this makes a large difference in dissemination of knowledge.[5] In Haryana a long time back a visionary E-Learning programme EDUSAT was introduced in 2005 to provide quality education through satellite, unfortunately there is no data available on if this programme has ever met success in any case. In the light of such a deep digital divide and other imperfections how can we impart quality education to different financially diverse groups of the students of society? Apart from enabling our colleges and universities with adequate technological equipments, we have to enable our students also who come from poor families but are promising young students lagging behind just because of scarcity of E-Learning hardware. Therefore, if the Indian education system aims to transit to online learning in the future, we really have to do something to bridge the digital divide and move the country closer to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

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