India Inequality Report 2022

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Introduction

This Inequality Report 2022 focuses on the extent of the digital divide in India. Two years after the pandemic, this divide has been more observable than ever. The pandemic pushed the world into the digital space. Technology enabled knowledge and information sharing with unprecedented accessibility. Yet this was the story of the privileged. The report takes a look at the other side of the story - unconnected India.

The divide stems from the following primary reasons - economic inequality, availability issues, affordability benchmarks set by private players and digital literacy, among others. The problem of this divide gets exacerbated during moments of national crisis as the pandemic made amply evident. The digital space is becoming increasingly relevant with government schemes and provisions being rolled out online. Health and education are two sectors that has been rapidly digitised. A huge part of the Indian population are not being able to access these due to this divide.

Key Highlights

The following points include the identified causes of the divide and proposed way/s to improve the condition.

1. Economic inequality is a key driver of the digital divide. The existing inequalities in real world is propagated onto the digital world. It is crucial for the government to prioritize improving the income of the poor through a decent minimum living wage.
2. Availability is a major hurdle in dissolving the divide. In rural and remote areas, internet availability is either intermittent, poor or non-existent. Service providers need to ensure its availability through community networks and public internet access points.
3. Affordability is difficult to attain as private players rule the market. Internet is becoming a basic requirement yet it has not been subsidised, especially for the communities in need of aid. The government needs to invest in digital infrastructure and establish strong regulatory measures.
4. Digital literacy is a basic requirement to be able to really minimise the divide. Education has caused major socio-economic gaps in any country. It is no different in the digital space. In rural parts of the country digital literacy camps can help teach the use of technology in schools and digitize panchayats and other bodies. Lowering of taxes on devices can also thin the existing divide.
5. A grievance redressal mechanism that can support rural requirements in edtech and healthtech-related complaints will benefit significantly. The uptake of the digital tools can be a slow learning process in most rural and remote population. A redressal machine will improve the chances of users staying on the digital space.
6. It is important to recognise that tech-based solutions are limiting. The decision to automate fair price shops has affected the economically backward as the government failed to recognise the digital divide. In times of crises like pandemics and otherwise, governments also need to consider low- or no-techsolutions.

The report also looked specifically into varied degrees of access to different technologies on the basis of caste, education, employment, region, religion and income. The digital divide mirrors the existing socio-economic divide - the marginalised communities have been the least digitized as the privileged groups reap an unfair amount of benefit from it. In certain cases, the digital divide exacerbates the already existing inequalities.

The government of India launched the Digital India programme 7 years ago in 2015. Private companies continue to be the foremost internet providers. The low penetration of government-owned internet service has far-reaching implications - leading to inequalities in internet accessibility and affordability. The techno-capitalist trend of one private player accounting for half of the total market share of internet services whereas government provisioning of the same remains negligible leads to the exclusion of the rural population in the race towards digitization. It is crucial that State takes a central role in working against the digital divide.

Read more: Oxfam- India inequality report 2022
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