DIGITAL INCLUSION: MIND THE GAP

The Cost of Inaction is Too High for a Poor Country

Dear readers,

Technology disrupts. It alters the way we think, consume, produce, live or aspire to live. It changes habits of a lifetime in a flash and devours structures of power. It is simultaneously a big equaliser and a tool of exclusion. And that is why technology can be a game changer for better and for worse.

Our generation has already seen massive disruption in the way we connect, spend, do business and use products of daily life. From ordering things online to sharing news and from using e-wallets to making online bookings, there is no going back to the old habits. But for those of us whose circumstances do not allow them to take the leap, the same technology leaves them further behind with more and more catching up to do. It is an anachronism in the times of breathtaking technological progress.

Digital divide is a catchphrase which denotes inequalities of opportunities affecting every aspect of lives and livelihoods. While technology makes our lives easier and works as a leveller, it also inhibits growth of a section of our people. It divulges an individual's social status, her caste, class, gender or geographical location within the country or in the world. Digital exclusion, therefore, is an obvious manifestation of a deeply unequal society with pre-existing fault-lines based on income, wealth, inheritance, education etc. which prevent some people from turning technologies in their favour.

In this issue of the Common Cause journal we attempt to unravel the connotations and consequences of digital divides, their social, political, cultural, and gender implications along with the ways to bridge the gap. We know that technology has two sides, it has an incredible potential for inclusion and for making lives easier but it can also act as a barrier and widen the gap between the haves and have nots.

Promoting Digital Economies:

Let us look at the positive side first. We are in the middle of a telecom revolution which has empowered millions. Service providers like plumbers and electricians, food kiosk owners or cabbies use the humble cellphone to find customers at minimal cost. The farmers get crucial weather information and the right price for their produce. The cellphone can strengthen food security and public service delivery mechanisms. It is beginning to change the ways in which poor people can access education and healthcare. Mobile money is proving to be a force multiplier and it is estimated that nine out of 10 smart phone owners have used some form of digital payment at least once. Further expansion of cellphones is set to multiply economic activity in the coming years.

The negative side, however, is equally stark. "While people around the world make more than 4 billion Google searches every day, 4 billion people still lack access to the Internet," says the World Bank report, Digital Dividends 2016. It shows that gains have not proliferated with the dramatic spread of digital technologies. For instance, the number of internet users more than trebled in the decade from 2005 to 2015, from 1 billion to 3.2 billion, but the inequalities have also risen consistently. As a result, almost 60 per cent of the offline people are disconnected from the digital economy. No one should be surprised that the better educated, better connected and already privileged people have benefitted more from the digital revolution. For the rest, the internet (and the opportunities that go with it) remain unavailable, inaccessible or unaffordable.

So, how bad is the divide in India? According to the just released 75th round report of the National Sample Survey (NSS), only 4.4 per cent of rural and 23.4 per cent of urban households had computers (between July 2017 and June 2018). Those without a computer are over 95 per cent of rural and over 75 per cent of urban households. Even the number of those who do not own but can operate a computer is not very high. In rural areas, only about 10 per cent people can operate a computer and about 13 per cent were able to use the internet. (In urban areas, 32 percent were able to operate a computer and 37 per cent were able to use the internet) The NSS estimates that almost 15 per cent of the rural households and 42 per cent of the urban households had internet facility, leaving out 85 per cent in rural and 58 per cent in urban areas. IT Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad has promised to connect 2.5 lakh gram panchayats via optical fibre but we also need computers and skilled humans to use its potential.

Technology and Governance Must Go Together:

Many global studies tell us that digital divide is not simply an issue of taking WiFi or computers or IT-enabled services to the digital have nots. It is more about the people's ability to make use of it efficiently and innovatively for their own good. This requires decent infrastructure and farsighted policies for the growth of human capital. We need skilled workers, transparency in governance and accountable institutions. The use of internet, therefore, is to be seen not as a shortcut to development but as a facilitator. Technology can be a force multiplier but it cannot substitute a forward-looking education policy which provides affordable multimedia classrooms and constant monitoring of teaching-learning outcomes. Nor can it replace a fair and efficient criminal justice system, social harmony with peace and stability, and a competitive and impartial business climate.

Nelson Mandela said overcoming poverty is not a task of charity, it is an act of justice. He believed it has to be overcome because poverty is neither natural nor insurmountable. And therefore, the task of bridging the digital divide must be seen as an act of justice – social, political and economic – which is a foundational principle of the Indian Constitution. For digital dividends to flow to the most deserving, we need to understand how technology interacts with, and depends on, other non-digital and analogous factors like access to education, healthcare and good, accountable governance.

What we know for sure is that those in abject poverty have maximum to gain from digital inclusion. But this would mean a drastic rejig of both our online and offline policies. If there are any doubts, we can perhaps follow Gandhi's advice of recalling the face of the poorest and weakest person and ask ourselves if our policies are going to be of any use to him. The task is difficult but doable if we set our sights on it. It must be done because the cost of inaction is very high.

Do let us know what you think. Like always it will be a pleasure to receive your comments and suggestions.

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Editor