COVID-19 and Digital Inclusion

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted our economic and social lives in a multitude of ways. On one hand, the uncertainty around the duration of this pandemic has brought the world to a pause, while, on the other hand, it has caused an uptick in the digital space. Like all countries across the globe including India, the implementation of strict lockdowns has restricted the movement of people. This ensued in the increased usage of the virtual space that has spurred the process of India transition into a digital economy. Online platforms are being increasingly used for practices ranging from telemedicine to online education to minimize the disruption in the usual way of life. Consequently, the demand for video-conferencing platforms such as Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams, Webex, etc. has also intensified. As we are proceeding towards a global economic downturn, which is likely to have a huge impact on returns of the companies and jobs. However, there are arrangements being made by the employers and other stakeholders across the work towards work from home or online to retain the employment and other activities such as education and training.

However, when it comes to reaping the benefits of the virtual space, there are concerns that certain categories of people may be at a disadvantage due to their inability to harness the potential of the internet during the pandemic and in the post-COVID-19. Digital divide, which mostly revolves around the

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availability and access to digital technology, is a compelling concern at the global level as well as in the Indian scenario. 52% of the world's population does not have access to the internet. Additionally, the chasm also exists in the quality of internet – South Korea's average broadband speed is at 28.6 Mbps in comparison to Nigeria's meager 1.5 Mbps (Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development, 2017).

As India embarked upon the transformation process towards a '$5 trillion economy', its digital literacy stood at a mere 10% (Srivastava, 2019). Many services, including essential services, are now available online, thereby increasing the inequality which arises due to lack of access to the internet and digital illiteracy. The Inclusive Internet Index (2020) provides a rigorous evaluation of the operational status of the internet in 100 nations across the world, covering 91% of the world's population. It captures the four crucial categories of inclusivity - availability, affordability, relevance, and readiness. The Indian scores (all scores are out of 100) in comparison to the other South Asian economies covered are depicted in the Table 1 below. Although India ranks as the best performer in the regional category, it secures the disappointing 46th rank on the global scale.

Table 1: India's Digital Index Score and Rank

Country	Global Score and (Rank)	Availability Score and (Rank)	Affordability Score and (Rank)	Relevance Score and (Rank)	Readiness Score and (Rank)
India	71.1 (46th)	57 (68th)	82.7 (18th)	80.8 (46th)	78.9 (12th)
Sri Lanka	66.7 (56th)	62 (60th)	62.7 (60th)	85.7 (25th)	59.2 (71st)
Bangladesh	58.4 (70th)	53.9 (72nd)	61.6 (65th)	61.4 (72nd)	60.5 (65th)
Pakistan	55.1 (76th)	42.3 (86th)	63.9 (57th)	64 (71st)	61.9 (64th)

Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit

Albeit, India has the second-largest number of internet subscribers in the world, and the total number has reached 687.62 million by

2019 (Lohchab, 2020), a study conducted during the nation-wide lockdown on March 25, 2020 shows only 38% of Indians are connected to the internet either via smartphones or other devices (Schumacher and Kent, 2020). Further, in 2019, there was 51% of internet penetration in urban areas, as opposed to 27% in rural areas. However, as of November 2019, for the first time the number of internet users in rural areas, that is 227 million exceeded that in urban areas, that is 205 million (Mishra and Chanchani, 2020).

The subsequent sections analyze how the technological advancement processes are not socially inclusive for India across economic classes, gender, and age cohorts.

Economic Classes

There is no doubt that the coronavirus disaster has differential impact on different economic classes. Despite concerted efforts towards ameliorating income inequalities across and within nations, the pandemic is bound to widen the gap even more. In India, 51% of those who have higher income use the internet, as against 27% people belonging to the lower income category (Schumacher and Kent, 2020). The financial income of a person is also one of the primary factors which affect an individual's ability to access the hardware and software related to information technology, which facilitates the connectivity to the internet. The aspect of digital literacy is also closely linked with financial capability since digital skilling is an expensive process for less-developed nations such as India. Given the fact that a large proportion of the Indian population is not economically well-off, they resort to using smartphones for connecting to the internet (Neilsen, 2020). In addition, they are not able to purchase laptop or computer.

India is ranked last in terms of the percentage of the population owning a smartphone - which stands at a paltry 32%,

much lower than the median score of 70%, in a study across 34 countries (Schumacher and Kent, 2020). In fact, a basic mobile phone is owned by 35% of the people, and 32% do not even own a mobile phone. The difference between advanced economies and emerging economies is also evident here, as the percentage of the population owning a smartphone is as high as 97% in South Korea, 81% in the United States (US), and 79% in Germany.

Gender

Other conflicts and disasters through recent history such as the 2014 Ebola outbreak and the 2015 Zika Virus, led to gender inequality with women being disproportionately affected in dimension ranging from reproductive and menstrual health to access to basic education (Human Rights Watch, 2020). The coronavirus pandemic too will have its share of gendered consequences, especially in the domain of digital workspaces. According to the Global Gender Gap Index, India has a grossly substandard rank of 112 (out of 153 countries), with a low score of 0.668 out of 1 (World Economic Forum, 2020). The existing gender divides in the technological space in terms of purchasing power, usage autonomy, and digital skill will pose major problems for countries like India with low gender equality (Sengupta, 2019).

The percentage of adult men who use social media is 28%, as against 11% of women in India. The situation is reversed in advanced economies such as Australia, Sweden, Spain, US and Poland where the percentage of women who access social media exceeds that of men (Poushter, 2018). This is indicative of a clear gender divide about internet usage and connectivity. The disparity between internet users is even starker in rural India, where only 31% women have access to the internet compared to 69% men. However, there were 26 million new female internet users till November 2019, which indicates a 21% increase, as compared to

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the 9% increase in male internet users (Neilsen, 2020; Mishra and Chanchani, 2020).

Age Cohorts

The coronavirus has not only left the aged population vulnerable in terms of fatality but also in the realm of livelihood. Hence, age is an important factor that needs to be considered while assessing the transition to digital platforms for work. It is observed that the substantially older population is not so adept with digital devices due to a lag in technological skilling and exposure in the previous decades. In India, 57% of those between the age group of 18-29 years, 35% of those between 30-49 years, and 18% of those aged 50 and above use the internet (Schumacher and Kent, 2020). Thus, India depicts a clear digital divide in its working age population, where younger people are more likely to operate the internet.

The usage of social media also varies across age categories with 49% of those aged between 18-29 years, 29% of those aged between 30-49 years, 11% aged 50 and above use social media (Schumacher and Kent, 2020) – clearly hinting at the age factor in India's tech-savvy population. This is also indicative of the fact that the older population is at a severe disadvantage as compared to the younger workforce when it comes to participating in the digital workspace.

Industrial and Societal Challenges

The pandemic induced digitization of the economy is bound to create inequality in terms of access, jobs, wages, unemployment, amongst others. While there will be job losses between the range of 2 million to 2 billion due to digitization of processes, it has also been estimated that digitization would create approximately 6 million jobs across the globe from 2016-2025 (World Economic Forum, 2016). The consumer services industry will face the

highest number of job losses, followed by aviation, mining, and oil and gas industry. On the other hand, the electricity sector will create the most significant number of jobs, which is followed by the telecom sector. The digitally unskilled workforce will be the worst affected, as automated machines would replace most of their services. The government has the onus to ensure that the progress towards a digital economy does not enhance the existing income inequalities in the country by taking affirmative action to increase the digital literacy of the workforce.

In India, the Atal Bimit Vyakti Kalyan Yojna is in force, wherein employees (who have completed two years of insurable employment) covered under the Employees State Insurance (ESI) Act, 1948 are entitled to cash compensation for 90 days, once in their lifetime, after they have at least been unemployed for three months (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2019).The Indian government has taken a step in the right direction, by planning to extend the unemployment insurance to employees from the organized sector who may lose their jobs due to the coronavirus pandemic. However, this move is not hailed as positive by many who suggest that the restrictive coverage of the ESI Act only covers about 2% of India's workforce, therefore excluding a majority of the workers from its ambit. It has been suggested that a blanket unemployment scheme be implemented in the country to adequately deal with the job losses expected to happen due to the COVID-19 crisis (Jha, 2020).

Conclusion

COVID-19 has pushed society towards becoming incredibly digitally reliant. However, it brings to fore the stark gaps that exist in terms of being a part of the digital workspace. Given this apparent inequality, it will also have a detrimental effect on the various UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) such as SDG

1 (No Poverty) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), amongst others.

The digital divide is exacerbating the pre-existing socio-economic exclusions in society. At this juncture, it becomes imperative to ensure that those who do not have access to the digital environment are not further left behind in digital transformation in the post-COVID-19 world. The expansion of the Digital Initiative of Government of India can be potent mechanism for this purpose.

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