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Addressing the Digital Divide: Lessons from India

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Addressing the Digital Divide: Lessons from India

ABSTRACT

The paper examines the gap between urban and rural areas in accessing digital technology is a big issue, especially in countries like India. People in cities have internet facilities like fast connections, affordable prices and reliable services. On the other hand villagers face problems like weak network signals, poor infrastructure and high internet costs. This digital divide makes internet access a luxury for people living in rural areas. The urban population enjoys internet facilities while the rural population struggles with basic internet connectivity. The digital gap between urban and rural areas needs to be addressed to ensure equal access, to digital technology. This digital gap affects areas like education, healthcare and business. The gaps in educational field are Students in rural areas often do not have access to computers or reliable internet. This makes it hard for them to use online learning tools and they suffer a lot.In healthcare the gap are Poor internet causes difficulty to take doctors consultations and facing many technological issues and rural people suffer a lot. In businesses the gaps are they want to sell their products , and want to use online payment systems but they are facing problems as a result they miss out all the opportunities. Reducing the divide is crucial for equal development. When people, in urban areas get better internet access and digital education they can improve their lives. They can also take part in the world . Rural people need internet access and digital education. This will help them in imp their lives and help them to be a part of the world.

KEYWORDS

Urban, Rural, Digital, Education, Health

INTRODUCTION

In today's world, technology and the internet are no longer luxuries—they are basic necessities for education, healthcare, communication, and economic growth. However, not everyone has equal access to these digital resources. This inequality is known as the digital divide, which refers to the gap between people who have access to modern digital technology and those who do not.

In countries like India, this divide is especially visible between urban and rural areas. People living in cities such as Kolkata enjoy fast internet connections, affordable data, and reliable digital services. They can easily

access online education, healthcare facilities like telemedicine, and digital business opportunities. On the other hand, people in rural and remote areas often struggle with weak network signals, poor infrastructure, and high costs of internet services. For them, accessing the internet is still a challenge rather than a convenience. This gap in digital access has serious consequences. It limits opportunities for rural populations by making it difficult to access information, continue education, receive proper healthcare, and grow businesses. Even though government initiatives like Digital India and BharatNet aim to improve connectivity, a large section of the population still lacks meaningful access to digital technology. While India has crossed the milestone of 1billion broadband subscription as of late 2025 but the depth of access remain uneven.[1]

Therefore, bridging the digital divide is essential for achieving inclusive and equal development. Ensuring that everyone has access to affordable and reliable internet will not only improve individual lives but also contribute to the overall progress of society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many researchers and government reports have studied the problem of the digital divide, especially in developing countries like India. Earlier, the digital divide only meant not having access to the internet or devices. But now, studies show that it is also important how well people can use the internet. New research talks about "meaningful connectivity." This means that internet access should not just exist, but it should be fast, affordable, and useful for daily activities like studying, working, and communication. So, just giving internet is not enough if people cannot use it properly. Studies clearly show a big difference between urban and rural areas. Cities like Mumbai and Kolkata have good internet, strong networks, and better technology like 5G. But rural and tribal areas face many problems such as weak signals, fewer towers, and lack of knowledge about using digital tools. This shows that the gap is not only about technology, but also about money and education.

Researchers have also studied how this digital gap affects different areas:

Education:

Students in rural areas often cannot attend online classes because they do not have proper internet or devices. This affects their studies and future.

Healthcare:

[1] id

Poor internet makes it difficult for people to use online doctor services (telemedicine), especially in remote areas.

Business and Jobs:

People in villages cannot easily sell products online or use digital payment systems, which limits their income and job opportunities.

Government programs like Digital India and BharatNet are trying to solve this problem. But many studies say that these programs face issues like slow progress, lack of awareness, and unequal benefits. Recent research also shows that factors like low income, lack of education, gender inequality, and location affect digital access. Poor people and those living in remote areas are often left behind.

Overall, studies agree that the digital divide is a complex problem. It is not just about internet access, but also about affordability, education, and proper implementation of policies. Even though steps are being taken, a lot still needs to be done to ensure equal digital access for everyone.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative and descriptive research approach to examine the issue of the digital divide. Instead of collecting primary data through surveys or interviews, the research relies on secondary sources, ensuring a broad and well-rounded understanding of the topic.

The data has been carefully collected from multiple reliable sources, including:

- Academic research papers, journals, and scholarly articles on digital inequality
- News and credible online publications discussing urban and rural connectivity issues
- Digital platforms and websites providing insights into infrastructure and technological development

The study follows a comparative framework, where urban and rural areas are analysed side by side. Urban centres such as Mumbai and Kolkata represent regions with advanced digital infrastructure, while rural and remote areas highlight the challenges of limited connectivity, affordability, and access.

An analytical method is further used to interpret the data, focusing on the gap in digital access between urban and rural populations and the impact of this divide on key sectors like education, healthcare, and business , These performance and limitations of government initiatives

in bridging this gap .

This structured methodology enables a comprehensive and critical understanding of the digital divide, while also helping to identify practical and effective solutions for achieving inclusive digital development.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Constitutional provision

The right to express oneself freely on the internet in India has not been made a specific right but forms an essential component of Article 19(1)(a) of the Indian Constitution. In the past ten years, the court has firmly established that the mode of transmission does[2] not affect the very essence of this right. The Constitutional Basis of Freedom of Speech[3] and Expression under Article 19(1)(a)[4] of the Constitution of India guarantees that every citizen has the right to freedom of speech and expression[5] and Article 14[6] right to equality.

The right to follow any profession or carry out any occupation, trade, and business is enshrined under Article 19(1)(g)[7] of the Constitution of India. In the modern era, this constitutional protection includes all activities performed using the internet, including e-commerce transactions, service delivery via the internet, digital marketing, and freelancing. The internet is an important medium that helps people and organizations expand their markets and increase productivity. Thus, any curtailment of internet services could affect this constitutional guarantee. Nevertheless, the provisions of Article 19(6) allow the state to place reasonable restrictions in the best interests of the public.

In the case of **Anuradha Bhasin vs. Union of India (2020)**[8] In light of the internet shutdown in Jammu & Kashmir, the Court categorically stated that the right to practice speech and expression through the internet is a

[2] Nishant Sirohi, Right to Freedom of Speech and Expression Through the Internet is Part of Article 19(1)(a): Supreme Court of India, The Leaflet (Jan. 10, 2020), https://theleaflet.in/freedom/right-to-freedom-of-speech-and-expression-through-the-internet-is-part-of-article-191a-supreme-court-of-india
The Leaflet

[3] id

[4] id

[5] https://www.indialawjournal.org/archives/volume9/issue-1/article6.html

[6] INDIA CONST. Art. 14

[7] Rebant Juyal, Constitutional Liberties and Cyberspace: Analysing the Anuradha Bhasin v Union of India Case and Its Impact on Fundamental Rights, 23 Legal Info. Mgmt. 276 (2023).
https://doi.org/10.1017/S1472669623000622

[8] Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India, (2020) 3 S.C.C. 637.

fundamental right. It did not explicitly state "internet is a fundamental right," but it made the usage of the internet a means for exercising the rights guaranteed by the Constitution.

In the case of **Faheema Shirin R.K. v. State of Kerala (2019)**[9] has made a major departure from previous judicial decisions by considering internet access as an essential need rather than an amenity. In the countryside, the lack of facilities and connectivity results in the belief that internet access is a non-essential requirement. Nevertheless, the court made it clear that in modern times, the internet is a necessary tool for learning and acquiring information. Thus, declaring it a fundamental right stresses the need for ensuring equal internet access among both urban and rural communities.

GAPS BETWEEN RURAL AND URBAN DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

Although the issue of the digital divide has been widely studied, several important gaps still exist in the existing literature:-

Firstly, most studies focus only on the availability of internet access, but they do not give enough attention to the quality of connectivity. Simply having internet access does not mean it is useful. Factors like slow speed, frequent network failure, and poor reliability reduce the actual benefits of digital access. Therefore, more research is needed on "meaningful connectivity," which includes speed, affordability, and usability.

Secondly, there is a significant lack of ground-level data from rural and remote areas. Many studies rely on secondary data, surveys, or national-level statistics, which often fail to capture the real challenges faced by people in villages. As a result, the lived experiences of rural populations remain underrepresented, creating a gap between policy understanding and reality.

Another major gap is the neglect of digital literacy. Existing research often assumes that once people have access to the internet, they can use it effectively. However, many individuals, especially in rural areas, lack the skills required to operate digital devices or access online services. Without proper training and awareness, internet access alone cannot solve the problem.

Moreover, there is a lack of emphasis on social inequalities, including gender, caste, income, and education. Social inequalities have been known to play an important part in determining who has access to information and communications technology and who doesn't. It is

[99] Faheema Shirin R.K. v. State of Kerala, W.P.(C) No. 19716 of 2019 (Kerala H.C. Sept. 19, 2019).

observed that women and poor people tend to be less privileged in accessing ICTs, yet this area has been inadequately explored.

E-Governance and Socio-Cultural Issues:

- ***Linguistic Barriers***

  Language is a major problem for many people. Studies show that about 95% of people face difficulty because online government platforms are not available in all languages. Most websites support only a few major languages, while many rural people speak local dialects. Because of this, they cannot understand or use these services properly.

- ***Lack of Trust***

  Many people in rural areas do not trust online government platforms. For example, very few people use platforms like MyGov. This is because they are not aware of these services or have had bad experiences like failed online transactions. Due to this fear and mistrust, they avoid using digital systems.

- ***Gender Gap***

  There is also a big gap between men and women in using digital technology. Many rural women do not own personal devices and have to share phones with family members. Around 58% of women use shared devices, which means they do not get enough time or freedom to learn and use digital tools properly. This limits their skills and opportunities.

Moreover, there is a clear evaluation gap in government initiatives like Digital India and BharatNet.[10] While these programs are frequently discussed, there is limited critical analysis of their actual implementation, effectiveness, and impact at the grassroots level.

PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED

The digital divide creates multiple serious challenges, particularly for people living in rural and remote areas.

One of the major problems is poor infrastructure. Many rural regions still lack proper digital infrastructure such as mobile towers, broadband networks, and stable electricity supply. As a result, internet connectivity is slow, unreliable, and sometimes completely unavailable. This makes it

[10] id

difficult for people to depend on digital services.

Another key issue is the high cost of internet services and digital devices. Smartphones, computers, and data plans are still expensive for low-income households. Even when internet services are available, affordability becomes a barrier, preventing widespread usage.

The digital divide also leads to educational inequality. Students in rural areas are often not able to attend classes through online and facing problem to access digital learning platforms due to poor connectivity and lack of devices. This creates a gap between urban and rural students, affecting their academic performance and future opportunities.

In terms of healthcare, limited access to telemedicine services is a major concern. Poor internet connectivity makes it difficult for patients in remote areas to consult doctors online or access digital health services, resulting in delayed or inadequate treatment.

The divide also creates economic disadvantages. Rural businesses and small entrepreneurs are unable to use e-commerce platforms, online marketing, or digital payment systems. This restricts their market reach and income opportunities, keeping them economically disadvantaged.

Additionally, there is a lack of digital literacy. Many people are not trained to use smartphones, computers, or online platforms effectively. Without proper skills, even available technology cannot be fully utilized.

Lastly, there is uneven implementation of government policies. Programs like Digital India and BharatNet[11] often face delays, lack of awareness, and poor execution, especially in remote areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To reduce the digital divide between rural and urban areas, different steps need to be taken together.

1. Improving Infrastructure

The government should fully implement BharatNet[12] so that every village gets fast internet. In remote areas, satellite internet can also be used. Schools and health centres should have solar-powered systems so that internet works even when there is no electricity.

2. Improving Digital Literacy

[11] id
[12] id

It is not enough to just provide internet; people must know how to use it. Village-level centres can be set up where people can learn how to use smartphones, computers, and online services. Teachers and healthcare workers should also be trained in digital tools and basic awareness of technology[13].

3. Making Internet Affordable:

Internet and devices should be cheaper for poor people. The government can provide subsidies or low-cost data plans for rural households. Small businesses should be encouraged to go digital by giving them financial support or tax benefits.

4. Solving Language Problems:

Digital platforms should be available in local languages and dialects so that rural people can easily understand them. Voice-based technology can also help people who cannot read or write properly.

5. Using Better Technology:

In areas where it is difficult to build internet cables, advanced technologies like satellite internet can be used. Also, apps should be designed in a way that they can work even without continuous internet, so students can continue learning.

6. Strengthening Local Support Systems:

Local centres like Common Service Centres (CSCs) should be strengthened. People working there can help villagers access online services, especially those who do not have their own devices.

7. Supporting Rural Economy:

Digital platforms should be used to support small businesses in villages. Easy online loans (micro-credit) can be provided to help them grow without depending on traditional banks.

8. Technological support

In some remote areas, it is very difficult to build internet cables. In such places, satellite technology like Low Earth Orbit (LEO) satellites can be used to provide internet access. Also, educational apps should be designed in a way that they can work even without internet, so students

[13] E. Laxminarayana, Bridging the Digital Divide: Digital Literacy and E-Government in India, 8(1) Int'l J. Humanit. & Educ. Res. 36 (2026), https://doi.org/10.33545/26649799.2026.v8.i1a.318

can continue learning during network problems.

9. Institutional Solutions:

Local service centres like Common Service Centres (CSCs) should be made stronger. People working there, known as Village Level Entrepreneurs (VLEs), can help villagers use online services. They act as a link between the government and people who do not have devices or digital knowledge.

10.Economic Solutions:

In some rural areas there must be a subsidy slab introduced where a certain consumption limit of data that is consumed must be free of charge and after that there must be very minimal amount that must be charged to the residents.[14]

CONCLUSION

In today's time, the digital divide is not just a small problem—it has become a serious and long-term issue that creates inequality between people. Even in 2026, the gap between urban and rural areas in terms of digital access is clearly visible. While many people in cities are enjoying fast internet and advanced technology, a large number of people in villages are still struggling with basic connectivity.

Government programs like Digital India have helped in connecting millions of people to the internet. However, just having internet access is not enough. There is still a big gap in how people use the internet and what benefits they get from it. People in urban areas use the internet for education, jobs, business, and healthcare, while many rural users are unable to take full advantage due to poor quality internet, lack of skills, and limited resources.

This shows that digital divide is not a technical issue only but it also a economic and social problem. It affects important areas like education, healthcare, and employment. Students in rural areas fall behind, patients do not get proper medical help, and small businesses miss growth opportunities.

If this problem is not solved, the benefits of the digital revolution will remain limited only to cities and developed areas. Rural populations will continue to lag behind, leading to further inequality and what can be

[14] Delhi Cabinet Extends Power Subsidy Scheme Till March 31, 2025, The Hindu (Mar. 8, 2024), https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/delhi-cabinet-extends-power-subsidy-scheme-till-march-31-2025/article67925277.ece

called "digital poverty."

Therefore, it is very important to take strong and focused steps to reduce this gap. Better internet infrastructure, affordable services, digital education, and proper implementation of government policies are necessary. Special attention must also be given to women and disadvantaged groups to ensure equal access. The true development can only be achieved when every person, no matter where they live, has equal opportunity to use digital technology. Bridging the digital divide is essential for building an inclusive, fair, and progressive society

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