

Digital Literacy: How Prepared Is India to Embrace It?

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ABSTRACT

India is in the midst of great demographic and technological transformation. The country is expected to be the home to largest working age population in the world by the next twenty years. It needs to embrace digital literacy to address the rising demand for jobs. It will help to raise productivity as well as create inclusive growth. The present study discusses the concept of digital literacy around the globe. It further identifies the challenges and opportunities for digital literacy in India. The study finds that persistent barriers like illiteracy, poverty, under developed infrastructure and poor awareness of technology restrain the growth of digital literacy in India. The expansion of digital technology spotted through rise in internet and mobile subscription in recent years has generated hope but, concerted efforts at multi agency levels are required to sustain this momentum.

KEYWORDS

Challenges and Opportunities, Digital India, Digital Literacy, Internet based Services

INTRODUCTION

Exclusion, poverty and inequality continue to exist worldwide despite sincere efforts by various multilateral organisations and targeted initiatives by national governments. A sufficient thrust is needed to overcome this challenge particularly in developing countries. The situation in India is not too different. The rising multi-dimensional inequality along with an increasing and restless young population necessitates immediate affirmative action. The country is in the midst of the greatest demographic and technological transformation. Whereas every fourth Indian is illiterate and nearly seventy percent population lives in rural areas, the digital penetration has also picked up pace in last few years. For instance, every fourth internet user in Asia is an Indian. The total number of internet users in India is greater than that of the USA. At the same time, two-third of the Indian population does not have access to internet. The share of women among internet users in India at twenty-nine percent is considerably low. The situation reflects that majority Indians remain untouched by the information technology revolution. It is hard to aspire for inclusion, equality and prosperity under such digital divide.

India is expected to have the largest working age population in the world twenty years from now. Rapid job creation is essentially required to tap this huge demographic potential. In this age of information and communication revolution, it is equally important for the policy makers to ensure digital inclusion as it is to make rapid expansion of education and health opportunities. The World Development Report (WDR, 2016) reiterates that countries with better investment in people's education and health and; good governance is more likely to reap the digital dividends in the form of rapid growth, poverty eradication and overall development. Concurrently, access to digital technology for every citizen is essential to ensure inclusion and participation of masses in growth. It is a common saying that informed citizens are empowered citizens. Digital literacy is an important medium for

the citizens to connect with the world and become global citizens. The significance of digital literacy can never be over emphasised in eradication of poverty, inequality and exclusion. Though, there may be social, linguistic, gender and regional barriers to digital literacy in India. Another impediment to the evolution of digital literacy could be the lack of physical infrastructure. At the same time, there is high likelihood that digital literacy will bring prosperity by facilitating growth. The present paper seeks to develop the concept of digital literacy in India. It discusses the policy initiatives to attain digital literacy. It further wishes to identify the opportunities and challenges faced by India to overcome the prevalent digital divide.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital literacy received attention as soon as the computer became part of global business and educational culture (Dobson and Wilinsky, 2009). Those who were able to interact with this new technology were considered smart citizens. Although, the term 'digital literacy' existed previously to Gilster (1997), the study is still credited for initiating formal discussion on it. The study lacked concise definition of digital literacy and did not have sufficient academic impact. The term digital literacy got much popularity by the first decade of the twenty first century. The concern for digital literacy emerged when the spread of information technology was restrained to limited individuals/groups. OECD (2001) formally recognised the ensuing digital divide and stressed for containing it. Since then there has been continuous debate on need for digital literacy and methods of bridging the digital divide.

Eshet (2002) argued that digital literacy is more than just using software as it covers most of the cognitive skills like reading instructions, using digital reproduction in learning and, evaluating information. The study provided a holistic conceptual model to effectively utilise digital literacy in educational contexts. Alkali and Hamburger (2004) built upon the work of Eshet (2002) by arguing that digital literacy comprises of five digital skills namely: photo-visual skills, reproduction skills, branching skills, information skills and, socio-emotional skills. The study conducted a pioneer investigation based on application of the five skills among different groups of scholars. Later, Bawden (2008) presented the synthesis of literature on digital literacy and facilitated discussion on various facets and applications of digital literacy. Lankshear and Knobel in the introduction to Bawden (2008) extensively debated the plurality of digital literacy as literacies because of the multi-faceted concepts and applications. Belshaw (2012) argued that considering the plurality of *digital literacies* allows refraining from endlessly redefining digital literacy. The study drew eight elements of digital literacies out of the available research literature and proposed that co-constructing a digital literacies definition is at least as significant as the outcome itself. Further, it drew similarity between digital literacy and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and posited that digital literacy lays emphasis on inclusion and better quality of life through provision for public services. The scope of digital literacy goes beyond inclusion. It is bound up with global economic competitiveness and bridging the digital divide (ibid).

Martin (2008) talked of 'the digital society', a society made of digital devices and tools. The study found existence of this society in examples of our daily interaction with the digital devices which have infiltrated into every activity of our life. This same digitisation of our world is however responsible for isolated lives where people find social space through digital media. People meet each other less frequently and social media has replaced physical contacts to some extent. This modern society poses some threats too. The elderly is the most vulnerable to these challenges. Martin (2009) presented a three-level model of digital literacy to enable senior citizens to effectively use digital technology to end their predicament. The study found that digital literacy possesses huge value as means of social involvement and assertion.

The digital literacy may not come spontaneously to societies and individuals. Any policy initiative directed towards development of digital literacy skills should undertake multiple components to

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