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UNDERSTANDING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE: A STUDY ON CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES AND INITIATIVES

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ABSTRACT

In today's era of technology, digital literacy is a mandatory skill for everyone so that they can access all the essential services. But due to unequal distribution of digital technology, a gap is created between individuals, especially those who have access to digital technology and those who do not. Disparity in the opportunities to access information and communication technologies (ICTs) is known as digital divide. Now, the question arises what will be the implications of this digital divide as technology is being used in different spheres of life whether it is healthcare, education or governance. For this purpose, this research paper intends to find out the various causes of digital divide. Apart from it, this study seeks to know the consequences of the digital divide as well. It will also provide the recommendations with the help of which this gap can be reduced. Under this study, it is concluded that ensuring digital inclusion is essential for achieving equitable and sustainable economic development. For which comprehensive policies which emphasize on infrastructure, digital literacy and affordability is required.

KEYWORDS: Economic, digital, inequality, divide & disparity

INTRODUCTION

Digital Divide means the disparity in the opportunities to access information and communication technologies (ICTs) between individuals, businesses, households, and geographic areas at various socio-economic levels (<https://www.oecd.org/>). Digital divide has various dimensions such as access divide which describes absence of physical access to digital device and internet connectivity, usage divide which reflects differences in usage of technology and skill divide which refers to lack of skills to use of digital technology. NCAER Report, 2026 also highlighted hidden digital divides in India such as device divide, connectivity gap, usage skew and recommended to improve connection quality such as expanding affordable broadband and public Wi-Fi infrastructure, invest in the next generation such as integrating digital literacy into school curriculum and promoting access for girls and rural students, provide digital assistance to older adults so that they can access government and welfare

benefits and close the gender gap. Economic inequality is a key driver of digital divide, and recommendations such as ease the burden of indirect tax on citizens, provision of universal health as well as education services and setting a decent minimum living wage were provided by The Inequality Report 2022: Digital Divide.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Van Dijk and J.A., (2006) described the achievements as well as shortcomings of 5 years of digital divide research from 2000 to 2005. Shortcomings such as lack of sufficient attention towards the consequences of digital divide, lack of dynamic approach and lack of qualitative research and interdisciplinary research are provided. Barrett and Gerstenfeld, (2020) highlighted the barriers faced by the charter school students in order to access the remote learning opportunities and it was revealed that students of charter school experience low access to connectivity at higher rates in comparison to their district school counterparts. It was concluded that government should make plan for these schools and their students as well to close the digital divide. Esteban and Cruz, (2021) investigated the digital divide in times of COVID-19 pandemic set up, for which data were gathered through online questionnaire from students of State University and data were analysed with the help of frequency counts, percentages, and Spearman Rho correlation. It is concluded that digital divide exist along the demographic factors such as residence, annual family income, and highest educational attainment of parents. Apart from this, there were significant differences in internet access as well as in hours spent on the internet and expenses of mobile internet. Rajam, *et. al.*, (2021) explained the digital divide between disadvantaged and other caste groups using non-linear decomposition method and found a considerable first level and second level digital divide between them. Sharma and Banerjee, (2022) focused on socio-economic determinants of access to digital technology. They suggested that wide inequality exists in computer knowledge, use of computer and internet across socio-economic groups. Access to ICT in India across socio-economic, age, gender, caste lines and religion is unequal. Ray, (2025) highlighted that various issues related to caste, class, gender, and rural and urban divides impact youth access to the internet.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

This study intends to know about the causes of digital divide and its consequences as well. Apart from this, various initiatives taken to bridge the digital divide are also described. This study is entirely based on secondary data which is obtained from various research papers, internet, newspapers and reports. The nature of this study is descriptive.

Causes of Digital Divide

1. Geographical causes- Remote areas, hilly areas, or forested areas often suffer from issue of non-existent or poor network coverage. Even massive infrastructure gaps are faced by rural areas. Poor

network coverage, frequent service disruptions, lack of reliable electricity which is essential for keeping device charged, *etc.* might be faced by them.

2. Educational and language Causes- Lack of knowledge about different ICT tools also creates hindrance in use of digital technology. Even people who don't have proficiency in languages being used online also face problems in understanding digital content.

3. Poverty- Poverty also creates hurdles for people as they can't have access to digital devices. Cost of laptop or smart phone consumes a disproportionate share of annual income of low-income family.

4. Gender – As per Comprehensive Modular Survey: Telecom, 2025 (CMS-T), mobile phone is not owned by nearly half of the women living in the rural areas (<https://www.business-standard.com/>). Also, patriarchal norms also limit their exposure to technology. Due to which, their access to digital education or e-governance might be limited.

5. Low Participation- Rural people are not very attracted towards the web based E-Governance services due to various reasons like fear of using technologies or even ignorance of the availabilities of technologies. Also, they might not be able to cope up with the latest technological advancements as technology is changing very fast. People resist the change and are technology phobic (Kumar, 2018).

6. Cyber risks- As per the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF), 90% of Indians do not have basic digital literacy, making them highly vulnerable to cybercrime. Due to lack of awareness and preparedness, people are increasingly becoming targets of cyber threats (<https://www.kyndryl.com/>).

Consequences of Digital Divide

1. Effects on Education - Now-a-days, in digital world, to get success in education as well in the workplace, it is essential to have digital literacy skills. Students who don't have access to technology, they might face lower academic achievement, unable to participate in online classes, lack of digital literacy skills, reduced ability to collaborate with peers and limited exposure to digital content (Miah, 2024).

2. Increased Economic Inequality- Economic inequality means unequal distribution of opportunities, wealth and income, among various groups of society. Digital divide impacts the key areas such as education, employment, health and social services, which further contribute to economic inequality (Michael2025).

3. Effect on Governance- The aim of E-governance is to make public services fairer and easier to access for everyone. But if there will be uniform distribution of infrastructure and people know how to use digital tools and they also trust these tools, then E-governance might be possible.

4. Health disparity- Healthcare sector has become more digital but there are many people who can't have the privilege to access telemedicine services due to various reasons such as poor digital knowledge, lack of internet connection and socioeconomic disparity, which creates a major healthcare gap. It will affect the needy people disproportionately. They are unable to utilize modern health apps, and online health consultations as well.

5. Employment Disparity- Employment is also affected by the digital divide. People are at the risk of exclusion from emerging job opportunities. As per the World Economic Forum, nearly 40 percent of today's skills will become obsolete and 60 percent of workers estimated to be in need of reskilling by 2030 (<https://www.ispionline.it>). Across nearly all the sectors, digital skills are becoming essential. Due to lack of access to digital technology, digital skills and cyber security awareness, a threat will be to employment as well as entrepreneurship.

6. Social Inequalities- Individuals who have access to digital technologies, they can engage in social activities, participate in online communities and can engage in political activities. Otherwise, lack of participation can lead to a sense of exclusion as well as disempowerment which reinforces social inequalities (Baraka, 2024).

Initiatives Taken by the Government

The Indian Government is actively bridging the digital divide by taking various initiatives. Key initiatives include the Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyan (PMGDISHA) scheme for digital literacy, Prime Minister Wi-Fi Access Network Interface (PM-WANI) Wi-Fi hotspots, deployment of Common Service Centres (CSCs) and BharatNet project for rural connectivity. To provide affordable and high-speed public internet connectivity in rural and remote areas particularly, PM-WANI was launched in December 2020. Total 4,09,111 Wi-Fi hotspots have been deployed nationwide as of February 2026. This plays an important role in bridging the digital divide by enabling low-cost internet access through locally operated Wi-Fi access points. PMGDISHA was approved in 2017 and it aimed to digitally empower 6 crore rural households. It is creating one of the world's largest rural digital literacy programmes. Also, it is expanding access to online services and financial inclusion. Further, for citizens who lack devices, adequate digital literacy and reliable connectivity, CSCs serve as a vital physical-digital interfaces for them. It enables inclusive access to essential online services (<https://www.pib.gov.in/>).

NEP 2020 also focuses on digitalization in education. For the purpose of increasing the effectiveness of learning outcomes and developing the educational process, it increased reliance on technology. It promoted online resources and its adoption as well.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To bridge digital divide, broadband and mobile connectivity in rural areas must be improved. Efforts should be made to increase digital literacy and device accessibility as well. Training should be provided to teachers and frontline workers who can help people use technology for various purposes such as healthcare, education, banking, *etc.* In education, access to technology as well as internet, especially for low-income households should be increased. Further, to lower the cost barriers to digital access, Collaborations between governments and private companies can help. Concerns related to cyber security can be addressed by stronger data privacy frameworks.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is concluded that in order to achieve equitable and sustainable economic development, it is essential to ensure digital inclusion. For which comprehensive policies focusing on digital literacy, infrastructure and affordability is required.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

One of the limitations of this study is that it is entirely based on the secondary data. Further study can be conducted using primary data on specific groups and comparative evaluation can also be made in order to know how the digital divide affects each group. Further, this study can be extended to new technologies like AI tools and digital payments.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The implications of this study are that it will be useful to academicians, policy makers, research scholars & the general public as well. It will provide a clear view on the causes and consequences of the digital divide. It will be helpful to policy makers to design better schemes for digital inclusion.

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