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**Bridging Digital Divide in India to Create Equal Opportunities**

**Ramachandra Reddy Vemireddy, M.A., M.Com, M.Phil., Ph.D. Scholar**

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**Abstract**

There are many divisions in almost all societies and they all have some or the other negative impact on the people who live in those societies. But “Digital Divide” which is a side effect of the technology explosion of the 21st century is posing a new challenge. This divide started creating disparities in the dissemination of information and access to the knowledge resources between the rich and the poor, rural and urban, computer literates and computer illiterates, etc. If the government and the civil society do not take effective steps in bridging this digital divide it would get blown up into a larger problem of disparities in opportunities and consequently take the shape of economic disparities. To bridge this digital divide we have to explore different ways to take the information technology to the masses.

**Introduction – Rural people are at disadvantage**

Internet is considered to be the treasure house of knowledge because we can find almost all the information on it. It is also considered to be the information superhighway as the large quantities of data and information ceaselessly flows through the fiber optic cables. Skill in using Internet and the extent of its usage make huge difference in accessing and disseminating knowledge and information. In our knowledge society, it is the access to knowledge and information that makes the real difference. But, unfortunately in India, the Internet penetration is too low. So the computer literates who fall under the category of the rich, middle class or even lower middle

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class who live in urban areas are able to access Internet and improve their knowledge and grab the opportunities thrown by the business corporations that thrive as a result of the booming economy. But their rural counterparts are denied access to this vital source of knowledge since they don't have the required infrastructure. In some developed countries, they have made access to Internet a fundamental right.

### **Internet penetration in other countries**

In US, where around 65% (as on Feb 2010) of the people have access to this treasure house, the Federal Communications Commission(FCC) set itself an ambitious target to equip 100 million U.S. homes with 100Mbps Internet access by 2020. They also want to take the Internet adoption rate to more than 90% by 2020. (1)

FCC believes that broadband networks backed by high bandwidth will empower American entrepreneurs and innovators to build and expand businesses in the United States. They also started taking measures to effectively counter the *cyber attacks* and protect their information networks. (2)

### **We can't afford to lose the opportunity thrown by the Internet**

These days if a *netizen* seeks to access some information the first thing that comes to his/her mind is *Wikipedia* the free online encyclopedia. Internet has become an essential source for acquiring knowledge.

In fact, Internet is a very fascinating thing. Take the example of a newspaper. Every morning we get a hard copy of the newspaper delivered at our doorsteps. We eagerly grab it and start reading, as it has something new to offer. Humans by nature seek new things every day. It is a widely known fact that not more than 10% of the readers read beyond first chapter after they buy a book. So it is obvious that many people, after reading some pages or chapters shelve the book because it has become "old" and it no longer attracts their attention. But in case of a newspaper every morning we get a new copy and that is why we get fascinated by it.

Take Internet. It has something new to show us every minute, in fact, every second! So when a netizen sits in front of his or her networked computer he/she rarely turns his/her eyes from it. It has got everything we want. We can not only access information but even share the information with others.

### **Providing school going children with cost effective equipment**

To improve the educational standards in our country we need to devise a plan to provide every school going child with a networked computer which is affordable to even poor people. In fact, there is a program called *One Laptop per Child* (OLPC) started by MIT Labs. This laptop is very sturdy and runs on open source LINUX based software called *Sugar*.

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OLPC Project has made a start in India with a pilot deployment in a rural village at Khairat near Navi Mumbai where laptops have been deployed and every child carries one laptop home.(3) Just imagine a teacher teaching Geography lesson and the students in the classroom use Google Earth to locate the countries, water bodies and observe the terrain of different locations. How effective the teaching learning process would be!

Satish Jha, president and CEO of OLPC India has announced in April 2009 that two government organizations and one private-sector entity placed orders amounting to 2,50,000 XO laptops. These XO laptops were distributed to about 1,500 schools.

This is a step in the right direction. But considering the enormous population and the high percentage of children, it is highly inadequate. So the government should act in a proactive manner in promoting high technologies in teaching and learning. According to the surveys conducted by two trade bodies in India namely FICCI and NASSCOM only 15 to 25% of the students who pass out of Indian universities are fit to be employed.(4) So the educational standards are distressingly poor.

### **Improve the employability of the graduates**

The students who come from rural areas are not able to compete with their urban counterparts. On the other hand, students who are born and brought up in urban areas have access to good schools where the official medium of instruction is English and they are taught by teachers who have comparatively far better skills and knowledge and the methodology used in these schools is also far superior to the government run schools in rural areas. So there is a perpetuation of poor academic standards among the students from rural areas. They finish their schooling; they graduate and even join post-graduate courses in university campuses without any significant addition to their range of knowledge and skills. Once they enter university campuses they find the environment equally boring and dampening.

### **Deployment of technology to make students self-reliant**

Indian universities have become degree producing machines. There is hardly any research going on and they are also infected with politics and caste discrimination. So the students who are enthusiastic and have quest for knowledge develop cold feet after they face the real life situation in Indian universities.

One of the ways to change the situation is the deployment of technology at school level itself. The strategy would definitely bring about transformation in the education system in our country. Technology would make the children self reliant to a great extent and their dependence on teachers would get reduced. Teachers instead of projecting themselves as the sole resources of knowledge will have to transform themselves as the facilitators in the process of learning.

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## Infrastructure bottlenecks and the apathy of the leaders

But in India we face infrastructure bottlenecks like inadequate power supply, low *band width*, bumpy roads etc. But our leaders instead of thinking about how to solve these problems are busy in politicking and destroying democratic institutions. Corruption has grown to unprecedented levels and is threatening to undermine the economic growth rate of our country. The people in power always try to distract the attention of the people from real issues and to do that, they introduce populist policies and occasionally make statements like India is poised to become a world power; India deserves a permanent seat in UN Security Council etc. But do they make any real difference? What if we don't get a permanent seat in UN Security Council?

## Invest on development of human resources

Instead of thinking about these useless things our policy makers should concentrate on development of human resources especially on creating a *knowledge society*. There are some political parties and leaders who can't tolerate taking any progressive steps that are intended to improve the prevailing situation. To create knowledge society and to eradicate disparities we have to defeat the evil designs of these so-called leaders and try our best to bridge the *digital divide* and make information freely accessible to all the people. Unless we do this we can't make any significant achievements. Though most of the countries especially the countries in Africa and Latin America which constitute third world ordered for millions of OLPC XO-1 laptops, India is skeptical about its utility and announced its own program called '*Sakshat*' a tablet PC which reportedly costs around \$35. The HRD minister Mr. Kapil Sibal stated that the tablet PC would hit the market in 2011. But so far there is no indication of the availability of the gadget. So it has proven to be a damp squib. (5)

## Conclusion

As far as education and technology are concerned, the delay in decision making proves to be counterproductive. In this age of cut throat competition among the nations, India can't afford to be left behind in this race. According to a well-known man of letters in Telugu literature, Shri. Gurajada Appa Rao, a country is not a piece of real estate- it is a set of people (*deshamante mattikadoi, deshamante manushuloi*). The development of the human resources- educating them in the best possible way and helping them in keeping in good health so that they remain able bodied, must be the top priorities of any nation. For that the digital divide...disparities in access to information and its transmission must be bridged. Till then the rural urban divide would keep widening and a section of the youth would keep failing in grabbing the opportunities thrown by the growing economy.

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