

DIGITAL DISCONNECT: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON ONLINE LEARNING AND DIGITAL DIVIDE

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Education and related issues

The full report of the NSO's survey of '[Household Social Consumption on Education in India](#)', for July 2017-June 2018, highlights the poor state of computer and Internet access in several States. The disparities are glaring among different economic strata as well. The [digital chasm that separates the privileged from the deprived](#) remains unbridged years after the broadband policy of 2004, and its effects are painfully evident during the pandemic as students struggle to log on to online classes. While some poorly connected States may have improved since the survey period, the gaps are so stark that any development could only be modest. Only in Delhi, Himachal Pradesh and Kerala did the survey find Internet access exceeding 50% for urban and rural households taken together, while Punjab, Haryana and Uttarakhand exceeded 40%, unimpressive numbers still. Large States — Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka — had access below 20%. In today's milieu, net access is critical, considering that even where mobile phones and laptops are available — some States provide them under student welfare programmes — they cannot be meaningfully used in its absence. If net connectivity is 5% to 10% in rural Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka and West Bengal, only a slim minority can hope to do any academic work. Many remote locations have reliability problems and power deficits, making it a challenge to keep gadgets operational even offline.

Prime Minister Modi has acknowledged the digital divide by announcing in his Independence Day address that all [villages would be connected with optical fibre cable](#) in 1,000 days. This target, reflecting enhanced ambition, follows the one set in 2011 to link panchayats through a national optical fibre network — to raise administrative capacities through information infrastructure. Evidently, successive governments have dropped the ball. States have not shown the alacrity to make a big leap either, and the deficit has now dealt a blow to students. To make up for lost time, connectivity for education must be prioritised. Mapping the needs of each district based on the NSO data will help identify areas where children do need equipment and connectivity. Such efforts have been launched globally in the wake of COVID-19, some in partnership with the telecom sector to leverage its capacity for surveys and mapping. Some companies in India have made the valuable suggestion that their used desktop computers could be refurbished and donated, for which governments need to open a programme. On the network technology front, a new gigabit speed 'wireless fibre' standard is being viewed in developed countries as a leapfrog option to link inaccessible areas; it involves high capacity spectrum (E and V bands), and is commercially not contentious. The government needs to look at all possibilities and go into overdrive to bridge the digital divide.

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