

EQUITABLE ACCESS TO INFORMATION IN INDIA: SOCIO- DEMOGRAPHIC CHALLENGES

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Abstract

Information and knowledge are also important resources like other resources. The Indian Constitution assures the right to equality, that is equal access to all the facilities and resources in India. Equitable access to information and knowledge leads to the socioeconomic development of individuals, groups and entire nations. But in India, it is revealed that, there is inequitable access to information and knowledge and there are various socio-economic and demographic factors, which have become challenges. Educational equality reveals that, only some of the people have opportunities for higher education and many of the backward sections such as SCs, STs, OBCs and women are deprived of higher education. Women have subjugated status in Indian society and as such, they are backward in education. Nearly one-third of the Indian population is living under the poverty line and only ten percent of the population constitutes the richest section of Indian society leading to economic inequalities. Due to all these reasons, the use of computers, access to the internet, social networking, ICT applications, etc. is poor among majority of the population. Consequently, there is inequitable access to information and knowledge for the majority of the Indian population. The author has analyzed statistical sources on education, socio-economic status, usage of computers, accessibility to the internet, etc. of various classes such as SCs, STs, OBCs and women, who are facing inequality in Indian society. Hence, it is suggested to ensure equitable access to information and knowledge of all the people. For this purpose, it is suggested that NGOs and Panchayat libraries to organize information literacy to all the people. Further, it is suggested that the Government to initiate and implement welfare schemes to distribute laptops, smartphones, etc to increase the use of ICT tools and access and use internet to assure equitable access to information and knowledge. There is also a need to develop computer software, institutional web portals and e-resources in regional languages to increase information equity.

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Keywords

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Introduction

Equity is concerned with equality to access all resources and facilities to all people of a geographical area and the term ‘Equity’ is synonymous with ‘Equality’. For balanced and sustainable development, it is essential that, people of all religions, all castes, all the races, from all the geographical areas in a country and of different genders have equal access to all the facilities and resources. The Indian Constitution has also emphasized the Right to Equality as fundamental right of every Indian citizen. In other words, Articles 14 to 18 of the Indian Constitution have clarified that, “The right to equality provides for the equal treatment of everyone before the law, prevents discrimination on various grounds, treats everybody as equals in matters of public employment, and abolishes untouchability and titles”.

In the 21st century, information is a critical resource that makes decisions in all the sectors such as agriculture, industry, organized and unorganized sectors of employment, education, women empowerment, Government policies and so on. The information generated should be communicated for the development of various sectors. The latest information acts as a resource for people of all sectors. For instance, information on climate change, soil, use of fertilizers, utilization of water resources, etc. helps farmers to develop agriculture, information on the investment strategies, production methods, overheads, stock market analysis, labor legislations, etc. helps industrial units and corporate organizations to develop and prosper. Similarly, information on welfare schemes, educational measures, women empowerment schemes, etc helps to develop the community or common people. In this way, information is regarded as an important resource equally needed for all the types of people irrespective of age group, religion, caste, occupation, gender or any other criteria.

Challenges to Information Equity in India

In India, it is found that, people of all religions, castes, genders, of different economic backgrounds, etc. are living and achieving unity in diversity. Though, there is unity in diversity, there are different socio-demographic barriers, which have become challenges to achieving information equity. Consequently, there is a regional and sectorial imbalance in India.

1. Educational Disparities:

Literacy is a prerequisite for being able to participate fully in society—including the act of getting online. A low literacy rate is a major impediment to

information access and equity. It is noted that, education and information literacy play significant roles in accessing and use of information for development. It is found that, nearly one-third of the entire Indian population is not aware of reading and writing skills even in their mother tongue, which has become a major challenge for information equity and social development. Compared to the male population, the female population is deprived of education. The following table revealed the Differential Educational Attainments in India (NSSO, 2011):

Table No. 1. Differential Educational Attainments in India, 2011

Particulars	Male (%)	Female (%)
Literacy Rate	82.1	65.5
Gross Attendance Ratio in Primary Education	100	98
Gross Attendance in Middle Education	90	88
Gross Attendance in Secondary Education	96	85
Gross Attendance in Higher Education	67	54

Based on the Census of India, 2011, Dasgupta (2018) presented sex-wise literacy rates in India in rural and urban areas as under.

Table No. 2. Literacy Rate

Residence	Sex	Literacy (%)
Urban	Male	89.67
	Female	79.92
Rural	Male	78.57
	Female	58.75

The above table made it clear that, compared literacy rate of men in urban areas, the literacy rate of women in rural areas has a wider gap. It shows that, the rural women have information inequities.

Recent statistics released by the Ministry of Education, Government of India (2023) revealed that, the enrolment in higher education increased to 4.14 crore and female enrolment reached the 2 crore mark compared to 2014-15. There is also an increase of 28% in enrolment of SC students and 38% in enrolment of Female SC students in 2020-21. There is increase of 47% in the enrolment of ST students and a 63.4% increase in the enrolment of Female ST students in 2020-21 compared to 2014-15. Even there is increase of 32% in OBC student enrolment and 39% in female OBC students since 2014-15. Realizing educational inequality, the Government has initiated various measures such as increase in number of universities, scholarships, fellowships, reservations to weaker sections, etc and consequently, there is a substantial increase in higher education among all the caste groups.

2. Gender Inequality:

India ranked 122 out of 162 countries on the 2018 gender inequality index (UNDP, 2019). This index is based on the work participation of women, income generation and participation of women in economic activities. Women's labor force participation rate in India is only around a quarter in rural areas and below 20 percent in urban areas, whereas the world average is around half (Lahoti and Swaminathan, 2016). Indian women are 15 percent less likely to own a mobile phone and 33 percent less likely to use mobile internet services than men. In 2020, 25 percent of the total adult female population owned a smartphone versus 41 percent of adult men (Ishita, 2021). Indian females are 56% less likely to use mobile internet than males, with only 35% of active users in the country being females (c3india, 2022). India accounts for half of the world's gendered digital divide. A mere one-third of its internet users are women. It reveals that, the women are deprived of participation in economic activities and income generation. The reason for the same is that, India is a patrifocal society that "women are subordinate to the welfare of the family" (Varma, 2010). In other words, there is orthodox belief that, men are for outside work to generate family income and women are for household and unproductive work. Some of the studies conducted in backward areas of India have also revealed that, women are prohibited from using cell phones or mobiles including internet access.

Even though, the Government has emphasized, Mobile or Cell Phones as a tool for women's empowerment, it is found that, only 31% of women have owned their cell phones and of these phones, only 19% are smartphones and on the other side, 61% of men have owned smartphones. It increased the gender inequality and consequently, women are deprived of equity in access to and use of information and knowledge.

3. Economic and Income Inequality:

As per the 'World Inequality Report 2022', India - the top 10% and top 1% in India hold 57% and 22% of the total national income respectively while the bottom 50% share has gone down to 13%. Regarding the accessibility of computers and use of the Internet, the Oxfam Report (2022) disclosed that, of the 20% poorest households only 2.7% have access to computers and only 8.9% have internet facilities. On the other hand, of the richest 20% of households, 27.6% have computers and 50.5% have internet accessibility. Hence, it is essential to increase education and employment of people to remove income inequality barriers to accessing information and knowledge.

4. Regional/ Geographical Area Disparities:

Even after 75 years of independence, many of the villages are backward and even telecommunication facilities are not available in some of the villages. Further, a few remote villages don't have basic electricity connectivity. Hence, the rural areas are deprived of telecommunication and internet facilities. The following table shows the percentage of internet users in urban and rural areas.

Table No. 3. Percentage of Internet Users in Urban and Rural Areas

Year	Urban	Rural
2013	85	25
2014	153	32
2015	171	68
2016	262	109

Source: IAMAI Report, February 2016 as referred by Dasgupta (2018)

The above table made it clear that, compared to people in urban areas, the people living in rural areas are deprived of the use of the internet, which shows the inequality in access to information and knowledge through the internet. Even the Oxfam Report (2022) has confirmed that, only 31% of rural people access and use the Internet compared to user of the internet by 67% of the urban population.

Based on NSS 75th Round Data, Parmar, etal (2022) have presented the gender-wise regional imbalance in the ability to operate computers, access the internet and use of internet as under.

Table No. 4. Digital Penetration Across Regions in India by Gender

Regions	Ability to Operate Computer		Ability to Operate Internet		Used Internet	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Northern India	26.4%	18.1%	35.7%	23.1%	33.4%	20.9%
Southern India	29.8%	21.7%	33.8%	22.8%	29.8%	20.8%
Central India	13.1%	7.0%	17.5%	8.6%	16.3%	7.4%
Eastern India	12.1%	6.7%	17.4%	9.0%	14.7%	8.9%
Western India	26.4%	17.1%	30.9%	18.8%	27.7%	15.9%

Lack of knowledge to handle a computer is one of the main barriers to the use of the internet and accessibility to knowledge and information. The regional imbalance in operating computers, operating and using the internet is higher in India as there is a higher use of computers and internet in Northern, Southern and Western India and lower in Central and Eastern India. Even there is gender inequality in access to computers and the internet. Hence, the regional imbalance in the use of

computers and the internet has become a major challenge for information equity among people.

5. Use of Internet:

As reported in Data Report: Digital 2023 India, of the total population of India 1.42 billion in January 2023, only 692.0 million people are using the internet. Further, only 467.0 million social media users in January 2023 equating to 32.8% of the entire population (Simon Kemp, 2023). The report has described that, there are a total of 1.10 billion cellular mobile connections showing 77.0% of the total Indian population. It shows that, the use of cellular mobile is still a costly affair for 23.0% of the entire Indian population. It is highlighted that, of the total social networking users, only 26.5% are women and the majority that is, 73.5% are men. In another estimate, only 42% of urban women have accessibility to mobile internet compared to 58% of men living in urban areas, whereas in only 32% of rural women have access to mobile internet compared to 68% of rural men in urban areas (Shairgojri, 2022).

The UN Reports from 2013 to 2016 revealed the internet penetration in India as under.

Table No. 5. Internet Penetration in India 2013-2016

Year	Total Population of India	Total Internet Users	% of Internet Users in the Total Population
2013	1279498874	193204330	15.1%
2014	1295291543	233152478	18%
2015	1311050527	354114747	27%
2016	132680576	462124989	34.8%

Information is changing faster in the world and the internet is a major communication medium to access and use the information and knowledge. But, as shown above, compared to other developed countries, only one-third of the Indian population is using the Internet. Though the government is encouraging the use of the Internet through various initiatives such as e-Governance, distribution of free laptops to the students, etc, still the internet usage is lower in India. Hence, more schemes and measures from the Government are needed to increase the use of computers, mobile phones and the Internet to achieve information equity.

Apart from the major factors discussed above, there are also other factors such as Government policies, land ownership patterns, Globalization and Privatization, etc have also considerable influence on information inequities in India.

Suggestions

From the above discussion, it is clear that, educational inequality has resulted inequitable access to information and knowledge by people in India. There are also social barriers such as caste and gender, which make inequitable access to information and knowledge. In this direction, it is essential to formulate suitable policies such as increase in computer and information literacy for the weaker sections such as SCs, STs, OBCs and women and it is suggested that Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to organize short-term training programs to use ICT applications to different sectors. It is also essential to implement a welfare scheme to distribute smartphones to farmers, women entrepreneurs, women self-help groups, women working in unorganized sectors, etc to access and use knowledge and information to assure information equity. There is also necessity for all the students of 10th standard onwards to learn and use ICT tools such as laptops, desktops, smartphones, tabs, etc for online learning. It is also suggested that the libraries especially in rural areas (Panchayat libraries) to educate the rural people in the use of computers and the internet to access and use information through computers and smartphones. It is also suggested to develop software, institutional websites and e-resources in regional languages along with translating facilities so that, common people can access and use the information and knowledge.

Conclusion

Despite the various challenges and problems discussed above, due to the efforts of the Government, there is increase in education among people in India. E-Governance has also increased the use of ICT tools including the internet. In this direction, the Digital India (2015) program is an ambitious program that has increased usage of ICT tools, increased internet access and use, increased in use of digital currency, and e-commerce, improved telecommunication and internet facilities in rural areas, increased Aadhar, opening of Jan-Dhan Bank Accounts, Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) to beneficiaries such as farmers, women, elderly, students, etc and so on. Still, there is a need to provide computers with internet access facilities to rural libraries (Panchayat libraries and public libraries in rural areas) so that, the library and information professionals can organize training programs for rural people to increase the information literacy of the people. In Karnataka, a few of the such initiatives include the establishment of Karnataka Digital Public Libraries under the Government of Karnataka, Digital Knowledge Project is a Kannada e-Books Repository purchased for the benefit of rural people for use in Panchayat libraries initiated by Gulbarga University and is funded by Kalyan Karnataka Regional Development Board (KKRDB) and so on. More efforts are also needed to develop

computer software, institutional websites and e-resources in regional languages to increase information equity among common people.

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