COVID-19, online teaching, and deepening digital divide in India

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Online teaching is a new buzzword in academics in times of recent pandemic. The higher education departments and bodies in India have been continuously advising on the intense use of technology for educating as the need of the hour and seemingly the best possible alternative for interminable education. This is a good gesture and reflects on the seriousness the teachers and the administration give in the pursuit of knowledge. But, I would differ on a point that in a digitally divided country like India such impulses may escalate the divide further.

The mobile phone has emerged as an important personal asset in the last decade because of its ability to realise multitudinous possibilities. Evidentially, such a proposition can never be refuted. India, as of September 2019, had 1,173.75 million wireless subscribers. And, wireless teledensity has increased from 88.50 in June 2019 to 88.90 in September 2019 registering 0.45% quarterly growth rate. On top of that, the number of smartphone users crossed 500 Million marks in December 2019. Being a part of the teacher and researchers group from across disciplines, we have not only met suggestions on a large swath of dedicated software and applications but also observed the keenness with which a student's materiality (possession of mobile phones) is taken note of. However, the regular discussions on the materiality of smartphone possession as the new mantra to bridge the digital divide in India failed to take note of its *spatial* and *infrastructural* dimensions in times of crisis.

India's digital divide and its precipitation into the rural-urban divide have a long history that seemed to have been bridged to an extent by The third-generation (3G), fourth-generation (4G) broadband wireless access (BWA), and federal policies like *Digital India* (Nedungadi et al., 2018). However, spatially the connectivity is seldom uniform - places which are far from or at some height from the mean sea level from main urban centres have been facing the network outage issue all the yearlong (Mishra et al., 2019; Nandi et al., 2016). Our recent trips to Kalimpong (a hill city and district headquarters in the eastern Himalayas) and outskirts of Bhubaneswar (the capital city of Odisha, an Indian state) for academic reasons pinpointed the ensuing digital divide – in terms of *infrastructure* when the team was without internet for a couple of days but also in terms of *geography* where fringe settlements are kept out of the loop for whatsoever reason. India's education system is predominantly urban (Mahadev & Kumaran, 1988) that draws students from large peri-urban and rural hinterland. In the wake of the pandemic when most of the students are home, away from urban areas, a disproportionate internet service intensifies the divide beyond proportion. In times of internet's universal failure on giving up to the promise, such far-flung areas have the least connectivity of the internet and making futile attempts for its restoration often lands students in disorder and mental agony. Even if they somehow connect to the lectures, the intermittent network outages and breaks prevent the actual intention of the act from fructification. Taking classes for those who can only attend but seldom participate for the sake of mandatory presence as part of university curricula does more harm than good.

Secondly, the Cellular Operators Association of India (COAI) had warned about a breakdown in mobile services during the COVID-19 crisis in India (Khatri, 2020), which means that the digital-divide would deepen further. As a matter of fact, the mean fixed broadband speed in the country dropped from 41.48 Mbps in January 2020 to 35.98 Mbps in March 2020 (Khatri, 2020). Therefore, the central areas that were once having good connectivity are now suffering from slow and dead internet. And, the far-flung areas will suffer more from the infrastructural lacunae. Thus, our attempts at assembling students on a dedicated platform from different corners would evidently suffer more from network congestion and breakdowns. This would land the whole exercise in jeopardy.

The spatial and infrastructural divide that turns the digital divide deeper, any attempt to bring students into these ruptured spaces may bring more disorder and bring far-reaching negative

externalities. First, the failed attempts of a student to join online classes deprive her/his of parity vis-à-vis students having relatively better access to the internet. Secondly, coupled with the multiple apprehensions, this deprivation would add to her/his collapsing mental health. Thus, in times of a crisis that has weakened us psychologically, it is pertinent that we save ourselves from deepening the already existing digital divide.

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