

# SPWI JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL WELFARE

(A Multi Disciplinary Peer-Review Bi-Quarterly Research Journal)

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*Editor*

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**SOCIETY FOR PUBLIC WELFARE AND INITIATIVES**

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## DIGITAL EDUCATION IN RURAL INDIA: HURDLES



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### Introduction

According to Mahatma Gandhi, *True education must correspond to the surrounding circumstances, or it is not a healthy growth.* These words reflect the ceaseless need for educational institutions to keep evolving and comprehending the imperative demand of students by providing them with the necessary means. The transition from chalkboard teaching to prompt, flexible online teaching requires appropriate technology-enabled learning. Digital education has often been considered a viable solution for Rural India to address the existing gaps in imparting education. It is believed that digital education can curb the issues related to quality education delivery, the inadequacy of teachers in rural schools, high rate of drop-outs, insufficiency of innovative teaching-learning methods and lack of standard learning material.

Even the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 focuses on digital learning as a substitute for the traditional classroom model for interaction between teachers and students. While there are numerous benefits of digital education, the hurdles are still manifold to make education a complete online phenomenon in rural areas. The present Covid-19 pandemic crisis has had a major impact on the digital divide in India, particularly from the perspective of education with digital access. It has also brought into sharp focus the challenges that exist for digital representation of education in the rural areas of India. Following are some of the challenges:

1. **Access to proper devices and cost of data for rising use of content consumption:** While talking about digital learning, it important to observe the accessibility of accurate devices for each student to avail digital content.

In rural areas, only a nominal section of people have the privilege of accessing laptops and computers. Even students with access to desktops and laptops cannot avail of the internet and the costs incurred in the procedure. Apart from that, the phone screens available to them are not favorable enough for long learning hours. The data packages and their prices also tend to restrain both teachers and students from going ahead with live classes. Though, subsidizing learning data plans by telecom companies can be an attempt to bridge this existing gap.

2. **Digital Illiteracy and No Infrastructural Support:** A significant proportion of the rural population continues to fall short of the required internet bandwidth and knowledge to recognize devices and digital terminologies. Another major issue involves the absence of supporting infrastructural facilities such as a stable flow of electricity and the unavailability of high-speed internet.
3. **Gender Inequalities:** The penetration of online learning amongst the female population in the rural parts of India is even more taxing. Just like most domains, the availability of the internet and literacy in rural India is primarily available to men.
4. **Inadequate Skills:** The inadequacy of skills among the teachers of the rural areas to operate digital platforms is another key factor affecting the advancement of digital education. As the teachers lack the necessary training to use digital platforms, they are averse to adopt these educational methods.
5. **Language Hurdle:** Almost 85% of the population living in India does not speak English. The lack of access to standardized content in Hindi and other regional languages causes a slow rate of further online course adoption. Standardized digital content covering every major curriculum from K-12 to higher education level seems far-fetched. Curation of any quality content from open sources will amplify the expenses and will require the Government's synchronized effort. The syllabus also needs to be re-contextualized from a blended learning approach.

While the above challenges manifest the existing gaps for the dispersal of digital education in rural India, there are several initiatives taken by the Government to encourage online learning under the National Mission on Education through Information and Communication Technology (NMEICT). Other than that, eBasta is presenting a framework to make school books available in digital form as e-books to read and use on tablets and laptops.

eBasta is a framework to make school books accessible in digital form as e-books to be read and used on tablets and laptops. The main idea is to bring various publishers (free as well as commercial) and schools together on one platform. Besides the portal, a back-end framework to facilitate the organization and easy management of such resources has also been made, along with the web-based applications that can be installed on tablets for navigating the framework.

## **Advantages of eBasta**

### **School / Teachers**

- The eBooks and other contents in the eBasta can be logically organized by the school / Teacher while creating the eBasta.
- Teachers can choose and bundle content according to their teaching methods.
- Access to a variety of resources – text, simulation, animations, audio books, videos, etc – to choose from.
- Review, Comment, Rate on eContents.
- Help schools with lesser teaching resources to gain from the resources of better schools.
- Provide teachers who contribute content / generate more relevant collections nation-wide visibility.

### **Students**

- Easy access to interactive and dynamic content augmented with text, charts, graphics, videos and auxiliary resources.
- eBastas are delivered through the internet no packaging no shipping and hence NO WAIT.
- eBasta's are portable. Carry eBasta's in any storage medium without worrying about their weight and start reading them anywhere at any time.

### **Publishers**

- Single point interface for reaching out to multiples of schools, across the country
- Convenience to register, sell and distribute eBooks & related interactive e-contents online
- Overcome the logistical problems of book printing, transport and delivery, especially at remote locations
- Significantly shortens the cycle of content editing /changes and facilitates the faster release of updates
- Support for DRM from the pioneers in the Industry wherever required
- Get direct feedback from teachers and students regarding eContents

Further initiatives include SWAYAM Prabha, SWAYAM Spoken Tutorial, Free and Open Source Software for Education (FOSSEE), National Digital Library (NDL), Virtual Lab, E-Yantra, and MOOCs. Additionally, the Government's Digital India initiative also covers a massive plan to link the rural parts with high-speed internet networks.

## SWAYAM Prabha

SWAYAM Prabha is an initiative of the Ministry of Human Resources Development to provide 32 High-Quality Educational Channels through DTH (Direct to Home) across the length and breadth of the country on 24X7 bases. It has curriculum-based course content covering diverse disciplines. This is primarily aimed at making quality learning resources accessible to remote areas where internet availability is still a challenge. The DTH channels are using the GSAT-15 satellite for program telecasts. The SWAYAM Prabha has new content every day for at least (4) hours which would be repeated 5 more times in a day, allowing the students to choose the time of their convenience. The channels are uplinked from BISAG, Gandhinagar. The contents are provided by NPTEL, IITs, UGC, CEC, IGNOU, NCERT and NIOS. The INFLIBNET Centre maintains the web portal.

1. **Higher Education:** Curriculum-based course contents at a post-graduate and under-graduate level covering diverse disciplines such as arts, science, commerce, performing arts, social sciences and humanities, engineering, technology, law, medicine, agriculture, etc. All courses would be certification-ready in their detailed offering through SWAYAM, the platform being developed for offering MOOCs courses.
2. **School education (9-12 levels):** modules for teacher's training as well as teaching and learning aids for children of India to help them understand the subjects better and also help them in preparing for competitive examinations for admissions to professional degree programs.
3. **Curriculum-based courses** that can meet the needs of life-long learners of Indian citizens in India and abroad.
4. **Assist students (class 11<sup>th</sup> & 12<sup>th</sup>)** prepare for competitive exams.

## Free/Libre and Open Source Software for Education

FOSSEE (Free/Libre and Open Source Software for Education) project promotes the use of FLOSS tools in academia and research. The FOSSEE project is part of the National Mission on Education through Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Ministry of Education (MoE), Government of India. Below is the list of projects which are promoted by FOSSEE.

## Massive Open Online Courses

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are free online courses available for anyone to enroll. MOOCs provide an affordable and flexible way to learn new skills, advance your career and deliver quality educational experiences at scale. Millions of people around the world use MOOCs to learn for a variety of reasons, including career development, changing careers, college preparations, supplemental learning, lifelong learning, corporate eLearning & training, and more.

Though these schemes are supposed to be quite beneficial, there is a huge amount of work that remains to be done considering the size of India's population and the targeted areas. These tasks can only be accomplished when all stakeholders direct their efforts in conjunction. Here are a few ways in which stakeholders can contribute to overcoming the hurdles of digital education in rural India:

1. Education Technology companies should provide cheap multi-lingual platforms that could work on low bandwidth and provide access to quality content. To promote this, the Government can offer tax benefits to these companies.
2. Innovative solutions can be initiated to create the process of online education more interactive and vigorous.
3. Schools in rural areas should be provided with digital learning kits, and substitute sources of energy such as solar power should be installed in these schools.
4. State Governments can arrange online content delivery training for teachers.
5. The present situation will precede an analysis on topics such as penetration of digital learning in rural areas, economical learning platforms, redefining learning science from a blended mode of approach thus being more favorable for learners at large.
6. The rural areas of India can be better equipped with the essential infrastructure provided by the public-private initiatives.
7. The successful gambits under the CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) of corporate bodies fostering digital education in schools of rural areas need to be further promoted.

## Conclusion

The digital education hurdles in Rural India can be eliminated through the provision of affordable and accessible e-learning modes. Content Standardization, Facilitating all the vital amenities and services in government schools through PPP (public-private partnership) model, up-skilling the teachers by providing them with customized teacher-training programs on online education, blended learning in schools as well as the advancement of initiatives in digital learning space by NGOs & CSR wings of organizations need to be considered to propel digital education in rural India. Other than that, all stakeholders should come together and provide an ingenious pedagogy, accessible educational devices, proper infrastructure and a quality ecosystem for the expansion of digital learning in rural India.

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