CHALLENGES IN THE DEVELOPMMENT PATH OF DIGITALLY INCLUSIVE SOCIETY; A CASE STUDY OF BHARMOUR AND KUGTI OF DISTRICT CHAMBA, HIMACHAL PRADESH

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Abstract:

"The spread of Information and Communication Technology and global interconnectedness has great potential to accelerate human progress, to bridge the digital divide and to develop knowledge society".

Information and communication technologies are the major stakeholders in the process of realising development of society. In this backdrop, the proposed study will elaborate what are the challenges in digitally inclusive society and also how communication technologies will help in meeting the development of societyby minimizing digital divide. Critical analysis of the contemporary society will substantiate case of information and communication technologies as a helping hand for development. Enabling citizens to participate in the democratic process and their right to information access is important. To incorporate every citizen in the process, digital technologies have pivotal role. The dependency on new technologies have compelled the government of various nations to emphasise more on e-society and digital access. For good governance, the initiatives like Digital governance is commendable but large population, resources unavailability and the related issues are the major impediments in the way of digital inclusion. Practicing digital inclusion may be the important step to bridge the digital divide, which will empower citizen to participate equally in realizing the development goals.

Keywords: Digital Inclusion, Digital Divide, E-Governance, Development

Introduction:

Recent years have seen tremendous growth in the capabilities and reach of information and communication technologies (ICTs). The Internet, especially, has become a critical enabler of social and economic change and offering new ways of addressing development challenges. A new approach to development is conceived by United Nations while adopting for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through ICT(information and communication technology). As from language of sign and symbol to oral and written & printed and the latest the broadcast and the internet, communication has a long journey. The modern scenario where the ICT dominates in communication process, every information seems to be accessible on a single click, India is facing some major concern in bringing its all citizen in the same pace. One of the major issue in this is the digital divide.The term "digital divide is said to have been coined a decade ago by a former United States Assistant secretary for commerce and telecommunications and communication, Larry lrving. Jr, to focus attention on the existing gap in access to information services between those who can afford to purchase the computer hardware and software necessary to participate in the global information network, and low income families and communication that cannot …(Dragulanescu, 2002). Factors influencing

digital divide vary from region to region, the digital divide depends and the differences in the usage of communication resources between countries and regions intensifying. On the background of the earlier statement, the digital divide can be defined as the gap between individuals, households, business and geographical areas at different socio-economic levels with regards both to their opportunities to access ICTs and to their use of the internet for a wide variety of activities. In other words, this divide refers to the gap between those who can effectively benefit from information and communication technologies (ICTs) and those who cannot. Prof. R. Kling (1998) observed this divide from two aspect, technical access and social access. Technical access refers to the availability of the infrastructure, hardware and software for ICTs and Social access refers to the skills required to use the technical resources.

Economically and socially inclusive society leads to development. Development needs the unitized resources utilization.This utilization of resources should be in such a manner that development sustains. Sustainable development was defined by international enquiry into the relationship between environment and development, it is not concerned primarily with the environment but with the sustainability of the overall developmental context. This usually comprises three main elements: economic development, social development and the environment development. The term social development here means reducing and seeking to eradicate other dimensions of poverty, improving the quality of education, health, housing and other aspects of the welfare of individuals and communities, and enhancing the quality of social interaction, engagement and empowerment. To make this engagement, interaction and empowerment possible Information and Communication technology (ICT) can act as catalyst.

Case Study: ICT access for social engagement for development in rural society of Himachal Pradesh.

Area studied:

Bharmour is situated in between Pir Panjal and Dhouladhar ranges in district Chamba of Himachal Pradesh at the altitude of 7000feets. Bharmour is one of the tehsil of District Chamba and Kugti is its last village.

Objective of study:

This case study was conducted in which two societies were examined 1.Kugti (Chamba) and 2. Bharmour (Chamba). To analyse the Information and communication technological consumption pattern focus group discussion was conducted. How people from Kugti village access the information and consume it for their growth and how this access is different from the access pattern of people from the Tehsil Bharmour of the same community. The awareness level of government's development plans, schemes, information, feedback and participation & activism were studied. It was found that in Kugti, main source of information was the village Pradhan who go to tehsil for meetings or any person from society who comes down for his education or some other personal work. Interpersonal communication and group communication are the methods which were used for information diffusion in that particular society. Whereas in Bharmour, information access is easier as compared to Kugti.

Information is available through information and communication technologies. The area is equipped with good network coverage and internet connection. In this society, people need not depend on the Pradhan/opinion leader but they can access it on their own. It was also found that people especially the youth in Bharmour is actively engaged on social media. The youth is actively participating on digital media platforms. Whereas the youth from Kugti is engaged on digital platform only when to come to Bharmour because on technical inaccessibility. This study resulted about the societal gap due to information and communication technology accessibility.

Digital Divide: A Barrier in Social Interaction & Engagement

The broad application of information and communication technology (ICT) is a profound reason for optimism, since the rapid development of ICT-based services and systems offer the possibility for the needed deep transformation of the world economy and societies more broadly. This transformation is impossible without interaction, engagement and empowering the citizen in process of sustainable development. Information and communication technological enabled society will foster the development process. Access to information technologies is a major issue in the process of engagement in rapidly changing scenario. Because the citizens who do not have access to ICT cannot be involved in this process. This digital divide causes a significant problem in many developing parts of the world. In this modern world marked by a growing need for information skills at all levels, including School, University, workplace and ordinary life, similarly, there is an increase in outcries to bridge the digital divide. So the digital divide concerns much more information to increase the spectrum of skills we address. From an information retrieval skills, knowledge seeking behaviour and teaching on one hand, we therefore have an ICT environment and out cries for information skills concerns for description of the digital divide concerns the difference between those who have access to information (the have's) and those who do not have access to information (have not's). It is generally assumed that such diversity might impact on their ability to function in the changing environment. At university level it has been found that even if students are offered access to ICT and the opportunity to build computer and information literacy skills, that stills seems to be a divide when putting these skills to use.(Behera,j.k, p.139).

Barriers of Digital Divide in India:-

Expensive ICT& devices: One of the major hindrance in ICT is the cost of the technology. One section of the societyi.e. upper class is able to aces and afford where as otheri.e. Middle class or lower middle class families in India are still not able to bear the cost of information and communication technologies. The reason for this is household income and expenditure. The price of devices and services has to be in a way that accommodates everyone's budget. The price war has always has been a crucial player in the Indian market. The case of Freedom 251 mobile phone and Reliance Jio free network for free calling, internet accessibility and allied services of the network signify the importance of price war. The number of customer registered for Freedom 251 were 7.35cr. In the same way, Number of reliance Jio customers

in its first month crossed 16 million users and left other telecom services providers far behind in its kind of service. To compete this Jio scheme other telecom services providers had to give 4G internet at lower rates to sustain with their customers. In this Reliance Jio case, only providing calling and providing free 4G internet did not solve the problem of a common man. Technological enhanced devices were a major concern. However they tried to manage this with their lyf mobile handset. Still unaffordability of technology and device is matter of concern in collaborating.

Low technical skill and literacy rate: Accessibility only doesn't help out to be engaged with ICT. Being able to afford the cost of ICT but not being skilful enough to operate and utilize the technology by a person is subject of concern as it acts as a hindrance for digital engagement. There is a generation which is struggling just to know how to use a communication device whereas the other one is brought up with the technological advancement. Technical skills i.e. how to operate a device/ technology to communicate and to participate in the process of social engagement through technology. A step toward cashless economy and demonetisation is facing the serious challenges of low literacy rate and technical skill.

Geographical barriers: India is full of geographical diversity. Information and communication technology providers claim for access even in remote areas irrespective of geographical and climate conditions. But the ground realities are bit different. Many regions are still not in network coverage. In some of those areas many small enterprises are functioning. For example, in Himachal Pradesh; an enterprise Airjaldi is providing internet services. This internet service is again in a very specific region of Himachal Pradesh. Some district of the state have region with difficult or no ICT accessibility like chamba, kinnaur, lahaul spiti.

Language: Linguistic assortment is not allowing people to be in the mainstream of development. Apart from the constitutional approved languages, a huge number of dialects are in practice at grass root level. Labelling a region with a particular language and broadcasting in the same does not mean that the communicator is reaching to the last person in the audience. The purpose of communication will not fulfilled until the message is not the dialect which is used by the local people. Many community of remote areas not able to be part of inclusive society only because of this language barrier.

These are some major barriers of digital divide which do not countenance the citizen to socially interact and to take part in the development process. In the case of Kugti and Bharmour, is was found that if people from Kugti are backward, one of the main reason is information inaccessibility. Delay in information receiving and feedback is a major hindrance for Kugti people. The union government initiative like e-governance and m-governance are not in the access of digitally divided society.

Digitally inclusive society and development:

Digitally inclusive society highlights the path to development. As ICTs give every chance to contribute in development process. Citizens will be able to participate from their native place

as they need not to come physically to participate in policy formulation and implementation. Not only this, ICTs provide a platform to get effectively engaged with normal life routine works from Health to Education and Agriculture to weather forecast. Now a person does not need to go to health institutions for consultation or Interactive voice response system(IVRS) will assist him. ICTs can make the education and learning process easier. From open and distance learning to the topics of prescribed syllabus, general awareness to specific competition exam preparation series ICTs assisting with every possible method. Sustainable livelihoods and improved well-being through growth and poverty reduction can be addressed through ICTs. According to weather, what and how a crop should reap, what kind of fertilisers, soil and water treatment to be used to gain better agriculture production without harming the environment and health. Mobile message services for farmers will be helpful in reduction of risk and vulnerabilities of farming communities.ICT initiative like Mother Child tracking system (MCTS) for pregnant ladies for all health updates for better care and reminders for vaccines. M-governance for transparent and easy bureaucracyto track requisite information seems possible with ICTs. To make the way possible to sustainable development emphasis should be given on making all these services available to every citizen of the society without any discrimination of class, caste, creed and culture.

Conclusion:

It is widely accepted that ICTs accelerate the speed of development. World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) has expressed the importance of ICTs and internet in development and establishing base for economic and social progress infrastructure providing tools for programme in health, education and finance sector. Technical development and services of ICTs have emphasized the ICT capabilities to achieve sustainable development goals. The ICTs provides the underpinning platform for the growth of an emerging digital economy, in which production, distribution and consumption depend on broadband networks and services. It will, therefore, be a critical enabler of sustainable development. In India, sustainable development phenomenon can be observed in a different perspective as the demographic conditions are very different from the American and European continent. Large population over diversified geographic conditions, economical class divide and initiatives for citizen engagement need to be addressed more strongly. Information and communication technologies can be used more effectively so citizens must be equipped and trained properly. For this, many initiative can be taken up such as ICTs training in education institution. Open and distance learning and blended mode of learning should be encouraged. Government bureaucracy& frontline workersmust approach to the last citizen and guide him/her about how ICT can empower them to be more participatory in the policy formulation and development initiatives. Citizens need to be convinced to shift from traditional system of Information and communication technologies based system then only ICTs can help in achieving sustainable development goals.

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