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Free Internet Gadget and Package to Poor Students

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Why in News

The Delhi High Court has directed **both private and government schools** in Delhi to provide **gadgets and Internet packages free of cost to poor students** for attending online classes.

Key Points

- **Ruling:** If a school decides to opt for online mode as a medium of instruction, it will have to ensure that students belonging to the **Economically Weaker Section (EWS) and Disadvantaged Group (DG) category** also have access and are able to avail of the same.
 - Private unaided schools will be **entitled to claim reimbursement** of reasonable cost for procurement of the gadget and Internet package from the government under **Section 12(2)** of the **Right to Education (RTE) Act**.
- **Legal Provisions: Intra-class discrimination**, especially between the 75% fee-paying students and the 25% EWS/DG students, **upsets the level playing field** and creates a **digital divide** in the classroom which is violative of **RTE Act, 2009, and Articles 14, 20 and 21 of the Constitution**.
 - According to **RTE Act**, private unaided institutions and special category schools shall provide free and compulsory education to at least **25%** children belonging to DG/EWS category admitted to class I or pre-primary classes. They will also be **reimbursed by the government** for this.
 - **Article 14** of the Constitution of India provides for equality before the law or equal protection of the laws within the territory of India.
 - **Article 20** of the Constitution of India provides that no person shall be convicted of any offence except for violation of the law in force at the time of the offence.
 - **Article 21** provides for the protection of life and personal liberty. It states that no person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law.

- The ruling is aimed at narrowing the **Covid-19 pandemic-induced digital divide**.
 - According to the recently released **UN Report on the Impact of Covid-19 on Children**, almost **24 million children could drop out** or not have access to school next year due to the **economic impact of Covid-19**.
 - According to the **NSO report on Education**, nearly 4% of rural households and 23% of urban households possessed computers and 24% of the households in the country had internet access.
 - Among persons of age 15-29 years, only 24% in rural areas and 56% in urban areas were able to operate a computer.
 - According to the **Global Education Monitoring Report, 2020**, released by the **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization** (UNESCO), Covid-19 had worsened the inequalities in education systems worldwide.
 - During the height of school closures in April 2020, almost 91% of students around the world were out of school.
 - About 40% of low and lower middle income countries have not supported learners at risk of exclusion during this crisis, such as the poor, linguistic minorities and learners with disabilities.
- **Other Judgments on Right to Internet Access**
 - The **Kerala High Court, in Faheema Shirin vs the State of Kerala case, 2019** declared the **right to Internet access as a fundamental right** forming a part of the right to privacy and the right to education under Article 21 of the Constitution.
 - In the **Supreme Court decision** in the **Anuradha Bhasin case (2020)**, freedom of free speech and expression on the Internet was accepted as a fundamental right under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution. Trade, occupation or commerce dependent on the Internet is a fundamental right under Article 19(1)(g).

Government Initiatives

- The Centre has directed State Education Departments **to map the online access available to all their students** in order to **adequately plan curriculum and teaching methods** that can reach such students.
- **New Education Policy: National Education Policy, 2020** aims at making “India a global knowledge superpower” by introducing several changes from the school to college level in the Indian education system with special emphasis on digital education.

- **DIKSHA (Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing) platform-** **DIKSHA** is the national platform for school education available for all states and the central government for grades 1 to 12 and was launched in September 2017.
As part of **PM eVidya** announced under the **Atmanirbhar Bharat** programme, DIKSHA is the ‘**one nation; one digital platform**’ for school education in India.
- **Swayam Prabha TV Channel-** To support and reach those who do not have access to the internet.
- **Online MOOC courses-** Online Massive Open Online Course MOOC courses relating to NIOS (grades 9 to 12 of open schooling) are uploaded on **SWAYAM portal**; around 92 courses have started and 1.5 crore students are enrolled.
- **On Air** – Shiksha Vani, DAISY by NIOS for differently-abled, e-PathShala- Radio broadcasting is being used for children in remote areas who are not online (especially for grades 1 to 5).

Way Forward

The current ruling will help in the bridging the digital divide in Delhi and other states must follow suit. Though **Covid-19** pandemic has necessitated a shift towards online education at a faster pace, the same should be complemented with infrastructure reforms, support and training by the government, aided by civil-society groups.

Source: TH