Digital Divide in Education

Why in News

Recently, the Supreme Court (SC) warned that the Digital Divide caused by online classes will defeat the fundamental right of every poor child to study in mainstream schools.

- SC lamented how the Right to Education of little children now depends on who can afford “gadgets” for online classes and who cannot.
- During the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, as schools increasingly turned to online education the digital divide produced stark consequences.

Key Points

- Digital Divide:
  - The digital divide refers to the gap between demographics and regions that have access to modern information and communications technology and those that don't have access.
    - It is the gap that exists between individuals who have access to modern information and communication technology and those who lack access.
  - Digital divides exist between developed and developing countries, urban and rural populations, young and educated versus older and less-educated individuals, and men and women.
  - In India the urban-rural divide is the single biggest factor in the digital divide.

- Pre-Pandemic Divide:
  - Students from the urban area and rich families were learning the concepts of science with the help of modern technology and other e-learning platforms while schools in rural areas and poor families were lacking in basic infrastructure facilities like toilets, proper classrooms and drinking water.
  - The condition of female children in rural India was even worse than the male child, it was seen that many girls were dropping out of schools as the menstruation cycle starts as schools do not have basic facilities like toilets, primary care in schools.
  - In some areas, students had to walk for 10-12 Kms to avail basic education.

- Post-Pandemic Divide:
  - In urban areas and rich families where students and teachers are acquainted with digital education and due to comparatively high income, families can easily afford digital devices for education as well as they can afford various e-learning platforms.
  - The situation is the opposite in rural areas and poor families. In most cases, smartphones are owned by earning members, thus students are finding lots of difficulties in attending online lectures. Those who can afford smartphones are facing network issues.
  - In some cases, teachers are unfamiliar with online education technology.

- Consequences:
  - The Disadvantaged Bear the Brunt:
Children belonging to the Economically Weaker Sections (EWS)/Disadvantaged Groups (DG) had to suffer the consequence of not having to fully pursue their education or worse still drop out because of the lack of access to Internet and computer.

They even run the danger of being drawn into child labour or worse, child trafficking.

- **Unfair Competitive Edge:**
  
  - The poor will remain void of crucial information presented online concerning academia, and thus they will always lag, and this may be summed up by poor performance.
  
  - Hence superior students who can access the internet have an unfair competitive edge over their less privileged counterparts.

- **Disparity in Learning:**
  
  - The people in lower socio-economic classes are disadvantaged and have to undergo long hours of cumbersome studies in meeting the objectives of the course.
  
  - While the rich can easily access schooling materials online and work on their programs in a flash.

- **Decreased Productivity Among the Poor:**
  
  - Most underdeveloped countries or the rural areas tend to produce half-baked graduates because of inadequate training due to limited research abilities as connectivity to the internet is limited besides having low cadre training equipment.

### Constitutional Provisions for Right To Education:

- Originally Part IV of Indian Constitution, Article 45 and Article 39 (f) of DPSP (Directive Principles of State Policy), had a provision for state funded as well as equitable and accessible education.
- The 86th Constitutional Amendment in 2002, provided Right to Education as a fundamental right in Part-III of the Constitution.
  - It inserted Article 21A which made Right to Education a fundamental right for children between 6-14 years.
  - It provided for a follow-up legislation Right to Education Act 2009.

### Related Initiatives:

- Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing (DIKSHA).
- PM eVidya.
- Swayam Prabha TV Channel
- SWAYAM portal

### Way Forward

- Even though schools are now reopening gradually due to the receding curve of the pandemic, the “need to provide adequate computer-based equipment together with access to online facilities for children is of utmost importance”.
- Priority should be given to the less advantaged students who do not have access to e-learning.
- Genuine efforts must be invested to ensure every child gets good quality equitable education as a fundamental right.
- A solution has to be devised at all levels of the Government, State and Centre, to ensure that adequate facilities are made available to children across social strata so that access to education is not denied to those who lack resources.

**Source: TH**