



Mains Practice Question

Q. Unequal access to the Internet creates and reproduces socio-economic exclusions. Discuss. (250 words)

15 Oct, 2019 GS Paper 2 Social Justice

Approach

- Mention the recent development on the issue of right to internet access.
- Explain importance of internet access and challenges in promoting equitable access to the internet.
- Mention steps to be taken to promote internet access.

Introduction

- The Kerala High Court, in *Faheema Shirin v. the State of Kerala* 2019 case, 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.
- The court further held that forceful seizure of mobile phones is against right to privacy and highlighted the indispensable importance of internet in daily life, especially for excellence in education.
- Also, the court held that, in an information society, unequal access to the internet creates and reproduces socio-economic exclusions.

Body

Socio-economic exclusions due to unequal access to internet

- **Digital divide:** It can be seen throughout the socio-economic spectrum of India i.e. between rural and urban India, rich and poor, India's demographic profile (old and young, male and female) creating a **new form of inequality**.
- **Infringement of fundamental rights:** In *Sabu Mathew George v. UoI* Case (2018), the Supreme Court held that Right to Access Internet is a basic fundamental right and "right to freedom of speech and expression" subsumed "the right to be informed" and "right to know".
 - Unequal access to the internet is curtailing of **right to education** and acquiring knowledge by different means.

Importance of internet access on socio-economic development

- **Implementing government policies:** In the government's bid to promote e-governance to increase transparency and accountability in the system, internet access has become a necessity. Government schemes like Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) for disbursing funds to beneficiaries, wages to MNREGA workers, etc requires internet connectivity.
- **Promoting education and knowledge creation:** The Internet has become a primary source for gathering information and **promoting scientific temper** among the children and the youth. Any hindrance to internet access is deprivation of an essential right to know and understand things.

- **Health and Wellness:** Internet is an essential necessity to reach out to remote areas where physical presence is difficult. For ex: AIIMS Delhi Telemedicine programme supports the provision of Health care services at a distance.

Challenges to Internet Accessibility

- **Digital illiteracy:** According to the Deloitte report, 'Digital India: Unlocking the Trillion Dollar Opportunity' in mid-2016, digital literacy in India was less than 10%.
- **Lack of adequate infrastructure:** India vast geographic expanse creates challenges in establishing communication links to hilly terrains and remote places.
- **Linguistic diversity:** India has more than 1600 languages and dialects. Non availability of digital services in local languages is a great barrier in digital literacy.
- **Misuse of internet:** Fear of cyber crime and breach of privacy has been deterrent in adoption of digital technologies.

Way Forward

- The government is making efforts through programmes like Digital India Mission, National Digital Literacy Mission, the BharatNet programme, to increase internet penetration and digital literacy across India. Still, a lot needs to be done to create a large **digital infrastructure** in the country.
- Apart from digital literacy, there is a need for **awareness generation programmes** in preventing misuse of internet like frauds, cyber crimes, etc.
- There is a need to **strengthen telecom regulations**, so as to ensure market competition and make the internet affordable to all.
- In a broader context, right to internet access can help achieve Sustainable Development Goals 1(No poverty), 2(Zero Hunger), 4(Quality education), and even Goal 10(reduced inequalities).

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