

NCAER Report Highlights 'Hidden Digital Divide' in India

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A report titled *"The Evolving Landscape of Digital Inclusion in India"* released by the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER), in collaboration with The Quantum Hub and Women in Digital Economy Network highlighted that India's digital transformation has entered a new phase where the primary challenge is no longer basic connectivity but the quality, depth, and equality of digital usage. It describes this emerging situation as a **"hidden digital divide"**, where access to technology exists but meaningful participation remains uneven.

Meaning of Hidden Digital Divide

The **"hidden digital divide"** refers to a **new phase of digital inequality** highlighted in the NCAER report where **access to digital devices and internet connectivity exists, but meaningful, independent, and productive use of digital technologies remains highly uneven across individuals and households.**

- It shifts the understanding of digital inequality from a simple question of connectivity (who has internet access) to a deeper concern of usage quality (who can effectively use digital tools for education, governance, employment, and services).
- **India has achieved high levels of mobile penetration, but digital usage is largely concentrated in entertainment, social media, and passive consumption** rather than empowerment-oriented activities

like online education, financial services, or e-governance.

- It is characterised by **assisted digital usage**, where a significant proportion of households require help from outsiders to complete basic digital tasks, indicating lack of autonomous digital capability.
- It also reflects **structural inequalities** based on income, education, gender, and geography, where disadvantaged groups remain digitally connected but not digitally empowered.
- In the Indian context, the report shows that **despite widespread access, only a small proportion of users engage with online education (16.1%) and government services (11.4%)**, reinforcing the existence of a usage-level divide beyond connectivity.

Thus, the hidden digital divide represents the **gap between digital access and meaningful digital participation**, where technology reaches households but does not necessarily translate into inclusion, opportunity, or empowerment.

Key Highlights of the NCAER Report

Based on the **India Human Development Survey data**, covering 47,000 households and 2.1 lakh individuals, the study suggests mobile-led inclusion had widened access but not necessarily empowerment.

- **High mobile penetration but limited meaningful digital inclusion:** While 95.1% of households own a mobile device and 74.8% have access to a smartphone or internet-enabled phone, only 39.7% of individuals aged 15 and above use the internet, showing that ownership does not automatically translate into usage.
- **Very low use of internet for education and government services:** Only 16.1% of connected households use the internet for online education and just 11.4% access government services online, indicating limited integration of digital tools into essential public and learning systems.
- **Internet usage is largely entertainment-driven:** Around 66% use the internet to watch movies, television or news content, and 53.8% use social media, compared to much lower usage for productive purposes such as education and governance services.
- **Limited access to computers and tablets despite mobile expansion:** Only 8% of households own a computer/laptop and 2.3% own a tablet, showing continued dependence on mobile phones as the primary digital device.
- **Sharp inequality in computer ownership across income groups:** Computer ownership falls to 1.2% among the poorest households compared to 23.1% among the richest, reflecting strong socio-economic disparities in digital access.
- **Persistent connectivity gaps in households:** Around 27.5% of households remain offline, including 32.2% in rural India and 52.1% among the poorest consumption group, showing uneven spread of internet access.
- **Emergence of a “hidden divide” in usage:** One in five households requires help from someone outside to use digital services, rising to one in three among households with no formal education, indicating dependence and lack of independent digital capability.
- **Gender gap in internet usage remains significant:** Internet use among working-age adults stands at 57.6% for men and 35.6% for women, showing clear gender-based inequality in digital access and usage.

- **Low internet usage among adolescents:** Only 37.8% of children aged 13-16 actively use the internet, reflecting limited early exposure to digital tools.

Policy Priorities Suggested in the Report

- Expansion of affordable broadband connectivity and public Wi-Fi infrastructure to improve access in underserved regions.
- Improvement in availability of computers, laptops, and shared digital devices, particularly in rural and low-income households.
- Strengthening digital literacy programmes to enhance skills and independent usage of digital platforms.
- Targeted interventions for women, rural populations, economically weaker sections, and disadvantaged communities.

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