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Right to Internet Access and Digital Literacy

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This article is based on **Inequality of another kind** which appeared in The Hindu on 24/09/2019. It talks about making the right to internet access and digital literacy, a fundamental right.

Recently, the Kerala High Court, in Faheema Shirin v. the State of Kerala 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 held that, in an **information society**, unequal access to the Internet creates and reproduces socio-economic exclusions.

What are the impact and challenges of Internet Access and Digital Literacy on Socio-Economic Development?

- Offering services online has cost and efficiency benefits for the government and also allows citizens to bypass lower-level government bureaucracy.
 - It increases the **accountability and transparency** of the government.
 - It leads to **better public service delivery**.
 - It increases **participation of citizenry** into politics. etc.
- In a global economy, **knowledge of digital processes** transforms the way in which people work, collaborate, consume information, and entertain themselves.
- It will also augment the government's efforts to provide better education, health and employment opportunities.
- It also helps in socio-cultural mobilisation in Indian society.

Challenges to Internet Accessibility

Recently, due to the **information revolution**, many businesses and services have become digital and only some of them are available online.

- The **digital divide** emanating from **information poverty, lack of infrastructure,**

and lack of digital literacy leads to social and economic backwardness.

The digital divide 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).

- According to the **Deloitte report**, 'Digital India: Unlocking the Trillion Dollar Opportunity' in mid-2016, **digital literacy in India was less than 10%**.
- Also, in the absence of Internet access and digital literacy enabling that access, there will be the further exclusion of large parts of the population, exacerbating the already existing digital divide.
- Even though the government has provided various e-services at grassroots through common service centres, without internet access and digital literacy, these are of no use.

Why the Right to Internet Access Should be a Fundamental Right?

- **Curbing Inequality is the basis of social justice and development.**
- Also, reducing inequality also finds mention in **Articles 39 of the directive principle of state policy**, in the Indian Constitution.

It has now become a settled judicial practice to read fundamental rights along with directive principles with a view to defining the scope and ambit of the former.
- Right to Internet access and digital literacy is important to get rid of the digital divide and allow citizens increased access to information, services, and the creation of better livelihood opportunities.

Government Initiatives in the Field of Internet Access

- The government has acknowledged the digital revolution and is in pursuit of digital inclusion.
 - Government has launched, **the Bharat Net programme**, which aims to have an optical fibre network in all gram panchayats.
 - Bharat Net will act as the infrastructural backbone for having Internet access all across the country.
 - However, the project has consistently missed all its deadlines while the costs involved have doubled.
- Also, the **National Digital Literacy Mission** has barely touched 1.67% of the population.
- This has been acknowledged in the Sustainable Development Goals as well as by the Indian government and has led to the **Digital India mission**.

National Digital Literacy Mission

- **National Digital Literacy Mission** (NDLM) has been initiated with the vision to empower at least one person per household with crucial digital literacy skills by 2020.
- NDLM is an effort to complement the government's vision to transform one from each household as digitally literate.
- The project aims at helping adults with low technological literacy develop the skills they need to interact in an increasingly digital world.

Way Forward

- In this framework, the state would have:
 - **A positive obligation** to create infrastructure for a minimum standard and quality of Internet access as well as capacity-building measures which would allow all citizens to be digitally literate.
 - **A negative obligation** to protect citizen's right to privacy (declared a fundamental right by the Supreme court in Puttaswamy judgement).
- The government should invest the resources saved by moving services online, to create Digital infrastructure.
- The definition of digital literacy today must include the ability to access and act upon resources and information found online.
- Internet access and digital literacy are dependent on each other, and creation of digital infrastructure must go hand in hand with the **creation of digital skills**.
- Apart from it, there is a need to **strengthen telecom regulations**, so as to ensure market competition and make the internet affordable to all.
- **Zero-rated services for mobile data access**, could be an intermediate step to fully open and affordable Internet access for the poorest, provided that the choice of selecting services is transparent and inclusive.

While the Kerala High Court judgment acknowledges the role of the right to access the Internet in accessing other fundamental rights, it is imperative that the right to Internet access and digital literacy be recognised as a right in itself.

Drishti Mains Question

Unequal access to the Internet creates and reproduces socio-economic exclusions. Discuss.
