Digital Divide

Why in news?

The report of the National Statistics Office's (NSO's) the survey of 'Household Social Consumption on Education in India' for July 2017-June 2018 was released.

What does the report highlight?

- It highlights the poor state of computer and internet access in several States.
- The disparities are glaring among different economic strata as well.
- The digital gap that separates the privileged from the deprived remains unbridged years after the broadband policy of 2004.
- Its effects are painfully evident during the pandemic as students struggle to log on to online classes.
- Some poorly connected States have improved since the survey period.
- But, the gaps are so stark that any development could only be modest.

What are the findings?

- Only Delhi, Himachal Pradesh and Kerala had internet access exceeding 50% for urban and rural households taken together.
- Punjab, Haryana and Uttarakhand exceeded 40%, unimpressive numbers still.
- Large States like Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka had access below 20%.

What is critical?

- In today's environment, net access is critical.
- Even where mobile phones and laptops are available, they cannot be meaningfully used in the absence of net access.
- If net connectivity is 5% to 10% in rural Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka and West Bengal, only a slim minority can hope to do any academic work.
- Many remote locations have reliability problems and power deficits, making it a challenge to keep gadgets operational even offline.

What is the target?

- Prime Minister has announced in his Independence Day address that all villages would be connected with optical fibre cable in 1,000 days.
- This enhanced target follows the one set in 2011 to link panchayats through a national optical fibre network.
- - to raise administrative capacities through information infrastructure.
- Evidently, successive governments have dropped the ball.
- States have not shown the alacrity to make a big leap either, and the deficit has now dealt a blow to students.

What could be done?

- To make up for lost time, connectivity for education must be prioritised.
- Mapping the needs of each district based on the NSO data will help identify areas where children do need equipment and connectivity.
- Such efforts have been launched globally in the wake of COVID-19, some in partnership with the telecom sector to leverage its capacity for surveys and mapping.
- Some companies in India have made the valuable suggestion that their used desktop computers could be refurbished and donated.
- For this, the governments need to open a programme.
- The government needs to look at all possibilities and go into overdrive to bridge the digital divide.

Source: The Hindu