

Online Education - Constraints

What is the issue?

- Covid-19 and social distancing are likely to stay for a while.
- Given this, online education is not a transient phenomenon, and thus needs concerted efforts with a long-term view.

What are the technical limitations involved?

- With the onset of Covid, India's schools and colleges are functioning through online instruction.
- But digital deprivation remains high in India.
- Rural India has 22.7 crore active Internet users, slightly more than urban India's 20.5 crore.
- [According to a report by the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) and Nielsen]
- India's smartphone penetration now stands at over 50 crore.
- This still leaves out half a billion people, a large category of have-nots, in an increasingly online-determined existence.
- The call to boycott Chinese brands could also impact smartphone affordability among the rural and urban poor.
- Moreover, online classes, being video content, require 4G reception.
- While data charges in India are low, most handsets being used by the poor in India are not 4G ready.
- India's mobile broadband is known for its poor quality, especially in rural areas.
- In fixed-line broadband penetration, India ranks among the lowest in the world with only 6% (of the total population).
- This is much low compared with 55% in China, 70% in the Eurozone and 80% in Japan.

What is the imminent risk?

- With education becoming inaccessible or hard to access, dropouts could increase for want of a laptop, smartphone or Internet connection.
- This could affect the more than a decade of gains made in school enrolment through schemes such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan and the mid-day meal programme.

- To prevent their children from leaving school, poor parents may sell precious assets.
- This might push them further into poverty.

What does this call for?

- The State and Central governments should wake up to the widespread lack of access to resources necessary for online learning.
- A Central allocation of barely 5% of the GDP on health (1.6%) and education (3.1%) is inadequate.
- It is high time that governments realise the benefits of investing in human capital.
- As an immediate measure, States could consider allowing schools to channel unutilised funds such as those for sports, building and infrastructure upkeep for online education resources.
- Bharat Net project should be speeded-up.
- Cable TV can also be explored as an alternative for imparting instruction, as Kerala has sought to do.

Source: Business Line

