

A Critical Analysis Of Digital India Program Through Gender Perspective

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ABSTRACT:

Government of India prompted Digital India Program with an objective of transforming the country into “A Digitally Empowered Society and Knowledge Economy”. The program was launched in August 2014, aiming to work in the direction of three outcome zones:

- a. provision of digital infrastructure as a core utility*
- b. on-demand e-service delivery*
- c. digital empowerment of all citizens*

An array of schemes and policies are continuously amalgamated under the aegis of Digital India Program, so as to achieve these outcomes. In the year 2018-19 a new outcome zone was added under the program i.e. the development of cutting edge data infrastructure to support AI Innovations. As a result of new addition and to boost the program, the annual budget allocated to the program was almost doubled to Rs. 3,073 Crore in the year 2018-19. Digital India program does not mention anything related to gender equity or women empowerment in its policy documents, but from the popular dialogues by Union Cabinet Members it can be assumed that the basic idea behind this program is basically digital designed for strengthening digital skills amongst women entrepreneurs and including women in mainstream delivery system. The present study strives for offering a critical analysis of Digital India Program and to evaluate the degree of gender-transformative change through all outcome zones. The paper also proposes recommendations to build digital environment in which there are more openings for women as well as contribution to gender equality.

Keywords: Gender, Women, Digital India, Technology.

INTRODUCTION

Digital India program is a flagship program of the Government of India launched in the year 2014. The broad objective of this programme was to transform the country into a ‘digitally empowered society and knowledge economy’. The program outline begins with forming digital infrastructure as a utility for every citizen of the country. As soon as all the areas even the innermost village dwellers are digitally connected through broadband connection and high speed internet, the delivery of e-services of the government are planned to be provided to all Indian citizen and subsequently digital empowerment of all citizens will be attained.

OBJECTIVES

1. To critically analyse Digital India Program through gender perspective
2. To evaluate the degree of gender-transformative change through all outcome zones
3. To propose the recommendations to build digital environment with gender equity.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is fully grounded on secondary data available on official websites of Government and Non-government agencies.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF OUTCOME ZONES OF DIGITAL INDIA THROUGH A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

1. PROVISION OF DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE AS A PRINCIPAL UTILITY

At the time of launch of Digital India program, the access division was pursued to be joined through generalising mobile connectivity access, increasing broadband highways for health, education and welfare delivery and instituting ultimate public access points in entire Two Lakh Fifty Gram Panchayats. Regrettably upto December 2017 out of total 350 million Indians who have internet access merely 29% were females. In

the rural areas situation is even worst. Following points elaborate the failure of digital India program through gender lens:

➤ **No effective utilisation Universal Service Obligation Fund for reducing the gender cavity in digital connectivity**

With the entry of new player like Reliance Jio in internet service providers, the number of mobile and data users has numerously increased. As a result the prices of wireless broadband lowered. Conversely, the reduction in prices has not thrived in reducing the gender cavity as after Reliance Jio launch majority of new subscribers were urban. During the year 2017-18 number smart phone and internet users substantially increased but abundant imbalances was found in connectivity. Studies shows that user base consist of more young and educated people, whereas women are left behind although they constitute a key percentage of them. It is Undoubtedly comprehended that the market itself is able to channel this gender divide. Regrettably, the Universal Service Obligation Fund (USOF) continued to be under-utilised and the provision for gender budgeting was also ineffectually positioned. Even suggestions from Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) for setting up an all-inclusive recurrent data allowance for Indian citizens have gone unnoticed, however this type of a step offering distinctive allowance to females and rural population would have been massively helpful.

➤ **Gender- blind design of rural broadband**

The Bharat Broadband scheme aimed towards reaching every Gram Panchayat in India succeeded in creation and distribution of ICT-enabled services for empowerment of citizens socially and economically. On the other hand in June 2018, one more feather was added by planning to establish rural Wi-Fi hot spots in every Gram Panchayat area by department of Telecommunications. Aside from execution slacks, the scheme's proved to be gender-blind approach and overlooked the chance for merging the connectivity and information delivery for females. The TRAI has also realised that the worth of "Women Empowerment" will be marked when new opportunities will open up through access which will create inducements for future.

➤ **Improper approach to stimulate women's participation in Common Service Centres (CSC)**

The Common service centres were set up by the government under PPP Model, wherein a Village Level Entrepreneur will act as a franchisee by the Government for providing commercial services and managing CSC. These common service centres provide variety of digital services like Internet browsing, access to government provided e services, DTP services, digital literacy trainings and other commercial digital services. It is observed that no strong policy to increase women participation in the scheme neither in selection of village level entrepreneur nor in promotion of use of digital services by women. The worst part is there is no clarity in data about the number of women franchisees.

➤ **Improper implementation of strategies adopted for women's digital literacy**

A game changer scheme Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyan (PM DISHA) was launched in the year 2017 aiming to train around 6 crore Indian citizens by 31st March 2019 with the mega budget of 2,351 crore INR. Through this program only one member (preferably a woman) of each digitally illiterate household was to be digitally trained.

In spite of the fact that this plan could possibly be a turning point, lot of issues are raised about its viability, uncovering huge scale infringement in eligibility criteria of selecting recipient and incomplete benefits digital transactions knowledge to trainees. These issues were mainly raised by third party assessments hired by the government. Exactly opposite to the expressed plan, data shows that SC/ST and older women have not much profited by the scheme. Government introduced a modified design to keep an eye on recipient selection and improvement in the training quality. Tragically, reports from media exposed that trainers and local powerful members have figured out how to bypass these inspections. No attempt is taken to invest in an inclusive village level digital training center under Digital India program where females can upgrade their digital skills freely without any constraints.

2. ON-DEMAND E-SERVICE DELIVERY

A large part of Digital India Program is to revolutionise on-demand e-service so as to establish an efficient, reliable and transparent welfare delivery system. The prime strategies formulated are:

- i) e-kranti initiative for work flow automation and business process re-engineering to introduce a novel model of e-service and m-service delivery.
- ii) Systematic implementation of the digitalized unique citizen identification system through Aadhar.

The studies prove that both of the above strategies failed to create a gender responsive welfare delivery system. The failure of these strategies in terms of gender equalities is explained as under:

➤ **Absence of articulated structural design for women focussed e-services**

The central and state government departments proposed for transferring e-service delivery to a programme management committee under the e-Kranti scheme for the purpose of its appraisal. Out of all projects few were shortlisted as Mission Mode Projects to be accomplished in a stipulated timeline. The evaluation was totally based on technicalities and no inclusion of social bearings. Predictably, there was no development for assimilating gender perspectives in e-service delivery. The Draft National Policy for Women introduced in 2016 too absences a key vision on utilizing e-government as a public policy instrument for gender equality. Nevertheless there exists couple of activities that commit the transformative revolution, those are: The nutrition resource platform for Anganwadi workers, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare offered women directed health information outreach service, The Sreesakthi portal of the Kudumbashree Mission in Kerala.

➤ **Violation of Rights Aadhaar-enabled welfare delivery**

Government of India introduced a digitalised digitalized citizen identification system “Aadhaar” which links a person’s demographic and biometric data to unique 12-digit algorithmically generated number. This initiative was taken with a commitment of constructing an incorruptible government-citizen interface aiming to challenge venality in delivery of welfare services.

The basic idea was

- a) Eliminating duplication and inaccuracies in recipients records for various government schemes with the help of Aadhaar-seeding
- b) Open authentication of recipient while taking benefit of the schemes through on-the-spot analysis of one’s biometrics and its comparison against the UIDAI records.
- c) Replacement of subsidies with direct benefit transfers through Aadhaar-linked bank account so as to absolutely eradicate intermediaries.

Antagonistically these transitions to Aadhaar-enabled service delivery lead to a number of violation of citizens’ rights, at the same time shocking concerns for women from weak socio-economic whereabouts.

- i) Failure of biometric authentication and number of errors in Aadhaar seeding of recipient’s databases directed to bigoted eliminations of marginalized women. Women have lost prerogative rights as a result of technological failure in e-governance. Whether it was wages under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, food rations, old age pension or maternal health entitlements, it was a total loss of women’s entitled claims.
- ii) Another major concern which threatened women was right to privacy, dignity and social security. There is absenteeism of required restraints on conjunction of numerous recipient records. According to a report the beneficiaries of the “Swadhar Grah Scheme” for rehabilitation of deprived women and those who were released from human trafficking face the possibility of being eternally marked with slurred and defamed characteristics in all their happenstances with the administration. As a result in order to avoid exposure to risk these women possibly choose not to come forward to claim offered benefits.
- iii) Aadhaar-enabled direct benefit transfers have been introduced in total 316 schemes offered by 51 ministries. The design of such payments system overlooks women’s deficiency of self-sufficiency over economic and technological resources. In a country where a large number of women have mutual access to mobile phones, this payment system positions the threat of consolidation of dominion of male intermediation and regulation over her funds. Other challenges include low level of financial and digital literacy and absence of refined digital proficiencies which lead to frauds and cyber crimes.

3. Data infrastructure for Artificial Intelligence innovation

In the year 2018, finance minister Mr. Arun Jaitley openly accredited the progress of National Artificial Intelligence Strategy for goodness of society. A new outcome was added to Digital India Program for construction of the fundamental data layout as a crucial primacy for the program. NITI Aayog drafted a discussion paper on the AI strategy to back five critical segments: agriculture, health care, education, smart mobility & transportation and infrastructure & smart cities. In order to get support innovative AI solutions, NITI Aayog demanded for huge investment in national level public data infrastructure to maintain innovative AI solutions in suggested sectors. AI solutions for these sectors being AI supported clinical diagnostic tools, integrated SMART systems for public services provisioning in urban areas, tailored input advisories for agriculture, AI solutions for identification of students prone to risk of dropping out from public schools etc. The role of government is pivot in formation of the data ecosystem.

The discussion paper presented by NITI Aayog's did not focus on gender equality and women's empowerment. There existed non-existence of gender equality and moreover machine-readable data arrangements in various spheres proved to be faltering block to improvement of public AI substructure.

4. DIGITAL EMPOWERMENT OF CITIZENS**➤ Economic empowerment**

The vision of economic empowerment of the Digital India was to unlock new openings in the digital economy for upgrading enterprise and employment. On this digitally-enabled path of growth it was necessary to 'take women along', but the actual records shows dissimilar outcomes.

The program failed to provide a strong vision for women's economic empowerment in a digitally efficient employment market.

The vision was to promote access of women owned businesses to the digital marketplace in the Digital India treatise. The government established of Mahila e-Haat, an online digital platform that sanctions women entrepreneurs to digitally market their products by registering them without any charges and promoting women's contact to bank credit through MUDRA and Stand up India schemes.

Mahila e-Haat had an inadequate influence as a meagre number of women entrepreneurs are digitally efficient. The missing thing was a wider base required to promote and back digital presence and contribution of women entrepreneurs and building up their market network.

One more shortcoming of e-Haat is it only permits individual entrepreneurs to display products and does not enable online transactions. Women specific credit schemes are also not availed successfully.

➤ Political empowerment

Launched in July 2014, 'MyGov.in' is a web platform. It "that seeks to bring governance closer to the common man" through by "creating an interface for healthy exchange of ideas and views involving the common citizen and experts with the ultimate goal to contribute to the social and economic transformation of India". The web platform is the eye apple of Digital India Program as it hosts exposed debates and opinion surveys on policy proposals and announces about particular volunteering accomplishments. At present this portal has more than 1.78 million users and every week around 10000 discussions are posted.

The portal failed through gender lens as MyGov does not guarantee for women's 'right to be heard'.

Following are the key advices that can be used for future accomplishment in an attempt to make sure that Digital India Program prospers in implementation of continuous gender-transformative revolution, in the embryonic social archetype.

Proposed restructured Digital India program through gender perspective

- As National Telecom Policy 2012 declares Right to Broadband, a universal data allowance and a global standard in internet connectivity can be assured to all Indian citizens. A particular data allowance quota from USOF can be given to women who come from demoted economic and social backgrounds.
- In order to increase women's digital participation, Common service centres scheme can be restructured, especially in secluded areas. Special public access points designed for girls' and women's digital literacy skills, e-services, distance and vocational education can be established.

- There is an urgent need of an inclusive law that is able to report various violations and threats faced by women in cyber space. A secure and safe cyber environment is immutable for increased female's involvement in the digital model.
- Specific areas can be clearly identified by NITI Aayog wherein Artificial Intelligence solutions can help in gender reactive planning. The local innovators from priority sectors (agriculture, health care, education, smart mobility & transportation and infrastructure & smart cities) building A solutions addressing women empowerment and equality should get support or subsidy. With active involvement of gender equality specialists and civil society establishments, Principles of algorithmic and AI design should be immediately developed.
- Gender-disaggregated open data collections should be made obtainable in important sectors in order to allow civic assignation with public data. It initiative can become a milestone for advanced and socially public data accountable public data structure. A modified draft personal data protection bill must be offered which introduce grounded privacy shields as for personal data processing in public interest, consisting a strong 'Right to Explanation' provision enabling Indian citizens to question
- e-Kranti, the e delivery system should incorporate a planned gender element for designing women specific mobile data single window shopping platforms and mobile information outreach amenities of welfare schemes, digital and financial literacy, and emergency support. With the active involvement from the Ministry of Women and Child and other sectoral ministries like rural development, health, agriculture and education, a gender based outcome zone of e-government approaches should be established.
- The draft personal data protection bill must be modified to introduce stronger privacy safeguards with respect to processing of personal data for public interest; with a robust right to explanation provision that enables citizens to question discriminatory conclusions of AI based decisions.
- The shortcomings like grievance redress mechanisms of Aadhaar-enabled delivery Service should be re-examined in order to fix them. The Aadhar Act also states that no denial of any service or scheme should be there on account of errors in authentication. Concerned agency or department should provide alternate source of recipient's identification that doesn't have an Aadhaar card. Additionally a strong grievance redress mechanism should be set up to fix denial issues.
- There is an urgent need of enhancing digital skills of woman to make the most out of the developing employment openings in the digital world and to uplift their socio-economic prominence. On this pathway the current education policies must emphasis on girls' digital skills improvement at the nascent stage. The digital literacy platforms like PM DISHA should be assimilated into wide range of open and vocational educational programs.
- The MyGov portal should be based on techno-design protocols and elements that can raise significant civilian assignation and community enquiry. The portal's identity verification should guarantee 'right to privacy' to citizens. The portal should also integrate a strong policy for pre-emptive release of public information intended specifically for women by using numerous networks like SMS, web and voice based IVR.

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