



All the worst predictions about COVID-19 have, thus far, been proven true. Whether it was the rise of infection in a particular month, or the fact that the Government would clear “projects” in the absence of any opposition, or the increase in poverty and unemployment, the COVID-19 crises have deepened existing inequalities in accessing basic resources for sustenance, and technological ones such as internet and smart phones. With India’s GDP diminishing to about 23 percent in the first quarter, these technological inequalities will deepen further.

Goa’s Chief Minister, Pramod Sawant, had, a couple of months ago, made a candid admission that all people do not have access to technology like smart phones and internet. “Arogya Setu [app] is not compulsory. However, those who have smart phones need to compulsorily download the app,” he said. While the statement appears to contradict itself, the condition that *only* those who have smart phones exposes the gap in access to technology. All people in India do not have access to technology which means that the Government’s strategy of using apps and smart phones for communication is misguided.

The unequal or poor-quality access to technology is now hampering the education of children. The sudden switch to online and smart phone-based teaching has left many parents and teachers in the lurch. We have seen several examples of students climbing the roofs of their houses or a hill to get better internet coverage. We have also seen parents selling their meagre property to purchase a smart phone.

In Kerala, for instance, sometime back a photo of students perched on the roof of her house went viral. Many applauded the dedication of the students. But the viral photo actually suggests how deeply flawed is our education system, even in a state like Kerala which scores high marks in human development indices. Though the Kerala government has been proactive in making resources available, especially through television classes, the access to a television is also difficult for families who depend on daily wage jobs. But the gap between the haves and the have-nots of technological access is wider than before.

Since 2002, successive governments in Goa, under the chief ministerships of Manohar Parrikar and Digambar Kamat, have implemented the Cyber Age scheme. Under this scheme, students after completing SSC were to be given computers and later laptops at a subsidized rate. The scheme did not meet the targets of promoting e-learning and computer literacy. A couple of years ago, the government once again floated another iteration of the Cyber Age scheme, for the year 2017-18. The 2017-18 iteration too did not succeed as it hardly reached households that needed computers or laptops the most during the lockdown.

One thing is clear that had the Cyber Age scheme been implemented properly, along with strengthening the e-learning facilities in schools, the shocks of COVID-19 in education would have been minimally felt. Another problem in promoting computer literacy, apart from the logistics and distribution of quality equipment, is access to internet. Before the lockdown was implemented, rural areas had spotty internet at best.

Despite the lack of basic technology in primary education, the Government has been repeatedly promoting higher technocratic education, such as engineering, through the IITs. Thus, the technocratic and merit-based vision of India's future, nurtured by the so-called middle classes for so long, is a mirage. The crores of rupees spent promoting technocratic education and to create professionals for the IT industry, for example, has not seeped down to the lowest strata of Indian society. There are considerable number of areas in India where even spotty internet access is a distant dream.

In Goa, too, we have seen similar hardships faced by our students, especially in the rural areas. As such one needs to ask if technological innovation and technocratic education—the IT and engineering careers—have really benefitted Goa. The pandemic, while exposing the yawning gaps in access, has also made it evident that technocracy and STEM education has not created innovation that is required in a fundamentally unequal society.

As such the new IIT project in Guleli—which was shifted there after intense opposition from Canacona and Sanguem—seems like a case of misplaced priorities. The IIT project once again is promoted as a way of encouraging Goans to compete for a spot in a top-quality engineering training as well as boosting regional infrastructure and investment. Both these claims, touted even during the pandemic, seem hollow and a far cry from the reality of poor access to something as basic as the internet and smart phones.

Considering e-learning and technology, we must not forget that what literally powers these devices is electricity. The electricity supply is not regular; there are frequent power cuts. In the rural areas, sometimes there are power cuts for hours on end, if not more. In such a scenario how does one even begin to promote cutting-edge technology, least of all in teaching and learning?

In the last few weeks, the Goa government has announced that local bodies will be circumvented to set up telephone towers and lay cables to improve internet connectivity. Such a move seems directed to bypass any opposition or due process. Rather than taking the people into confidence during a difficult time, the Government chose to ignore them. This appears to be another way of clearing “projects” despite public opposition in the guise of fixing a COVID-19 related problem.

In the absence of basic services, pertaining to water and electricity supply to name a few, it is unwise to talk about e-learning or smart learning. Or even to promote advanced technical education because this will only deepen existing hierarchies and privilege. The COVID-19 crisis is proof that we need to strengthen basic infrastructure more than anything else.

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