

# Can internet be a human right?

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There cannot be a better environment than in today's India to discuss, advocate and realize key entitlements to its billion-plus people. We already have rights to information and education and the right to food security is expected to follow soon. At a time like this, a desire to step fully into a knowledge society and economy by making Internet access a basic right seems to be no less substantive.



Consider the development and governance priorities of our country. The focus of the Five-Year plans, national target schemes, state-level welfare programmes, all these veer towards achieving key development and citizen service goals in a stipulated period. Right from the community development programme in 1952 to the rural jobs guarantee programme in 2006 that ensures 100 days of work for every poor rural household, to the right to education in 2009, our national priorities are meant to uplift millions from deprivation and fill development divides. While the many successes have meant positive achievements, the pitfalls are notable. Poverty still hamstrings 40% of our people.

One way to look at these issues is that information deficits have aggravated India's backwardness and underdevelopment. Citizens are entitled to schemes and benefits but these have often not translated into development for the majority. Lack of information and information centralization have kept millions out of the development mainstream. The campaign for information as a basic right that led to a law in 2005 was, therefore, natural. This right today enables all citizens to access and view public information anywhere, anytime. The law has come as a boon, but the real challenge is to widen the process and achieve the goal of bringing all permissible information in the public domain. Information infrastructure, medium and platforms then become top priorities. The Internet is certainly one of them, and the other is mobile telephony, with its immense reach in Indian society.

Access to the Internet is a topic that has been discussed threadbare in recent times. National efforts towards development, good governance and informed decision-making would be hollow if access is limited. The next level of discussion, therefore, is how to streamline relevant schemes such as the national e-governance plan and the national knowledge network to provide for net access as a public infrastructure or utility service.

Any discussion on the Internet as a right should never be limited merely as a policy formulation. Internet availability and access has wider social implications that underlines equity, natural justice and more. While proponents will have valid reasons to argue for such a right, as it will propel wider social and economic indicators, critics will find many challenges in this approach. We need to note that the right to the Internet is more of an enabling access to the Net through

wider infrastructure deployment rather than actualizing it with a legislative mandate as a larger social or welfare state concept. This will also involve issues in access points, cost recovery and so on at the users' end. A recent consultation on Internet rights, accessibility, regulation and ethics held in New Delhi on 3 May outlined some of the specific areas of concern—right to information, Internet and information access, Internet governance, Internet regulation, content specifications, cyber law, and appropriate policy framework. The key consultation objective, organized by Digital Empowerment Foundation, National Internet Exchange of India and the Association for Progressive Communication, was to identify, deliberate and discuss Internet rights and governance to contribute to an enabling environment for all—with accessibility, stability and development of the Internet coupled with sustainability and security.

“Internet is a great empowering tool and it should be channelized in a way that governance issues are addressed adequately,” said Aruna Roy, a member of National Advisory Council, which sets the government's social agenda. “Internet can facilitate wider access to information and all must work towards it. Let's spread the usage of Internet and increase its reach,” said Jagdeep Chhokar, founder member of Association for Democratic Reforms, a civil society group established by teachers at the Indian Institute of Management at Ahmedabad.

The concept of the Internet as a human right requires further deliberation, consultation and debate. While nations such as the Netherlands have recognised access to the Internet as a basic right, in India it will require further thought and action. While other countries provided inputs on Internet and information around human rights in the universal periodic review of the human rights council that functions under the aegis of the United Nations General Assembly, the focus of India's submission only recently recognized the role of information and the Internet, that too because of the advocacy of civil society groups.

“Every public authority should provide as much information to the public through various means of communications so that the public has minimum need to use the Act to obtain information,” states a provision in India's Right To Information Act. “The Internet being one of the most effective means of communications, the information may be posted on a website.” Ironically, although India has 110 million Internet users, the third-highest in the world, less than 10% of the total population has access to it. Access to the Internet is about accessing basic needs as well as access to critical information and services at their doorstep. The right to information will be successfully implemented only if content is disseminated widely. This will be possible only when governing bodies and authorities allow citizens to access information anywhere, anytime. And is there a better medium than the Internet to provide access to information and ensure the right to information?

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