

DIGITAL CITIZEN: STRIVE FOR HUMAN PEACE

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Every human being is an ensemble of multiple pieces of unique information and data points, almost like a machine. The human civilisation has always attempted to discover itself, and the 'machine' like tendencies and processes that make up an individual. Today, developers and designers are constantly working towards innovations and technological capabilities that can emulate the human machine, and further use these capabilities to investigate people or offer human tailor-made services and information.

Incidentally, all machines play with data, information, and communication. People, are also constantly collecting data and information in various scripts, forms and media, and converting them into knowledge to store it in their memory. Over centuries, pieces of this collected and stored information has been passed down generations, through oral communication.

Later, many began to document this through hand-written manuscripts, and then printed copies of the manuscript. Innovative technologies helped us realise that information could not just be captured and retained by the human mind, but it can also be captured through audio visuals, archived digitally, and then broadcasted to the masses.

However, when one compares the lifetime of the written medium and the digital medium, the former takes precedence since it has remained—and continues to remain—the primary medium of communicating knowledge.

The importance given to the written medium has been such that we started treating the ability to write as a basic parameter of judging whether one is literate or not. We have discarded people who lack the ability to read or write. The modern world calls them illiterate and uneducated. It is usually the poor and the backward that fall into this category. People who speak languages that don't have a script, leaving the dependency of its knowledge on only a few hundreds or thousands of people in a community or region are subjected to further discrimination. They aren't even considered to be part of the "modern" times.

In terms of sheer number—and not national percentage—India has the highest number of illiterate citizens. About 30 per cent of the country's population is considered uneducated, even though they are only handicapped when it comes to the ability to read or write. This population, however, has been communicating successfully orally; and holds the knowledge of indigenous agriculture, medicine, craft, and much more.

In 2002, when I co-founded Digital Empowerment Foundation, I realised that India's poor population is not poor merely poor due to lack of financial resources, but more so because of its inability to access critical public information.

Back then, when the digital tools and the Internet were still new for the urban people we were the first to realise that the promise to connect the poorest of the poor, bring them into mainstream, and open up equal opportunities for them to consume or produce information. As early adopters of technology who understood its importance and potential, we began connecting the remotest parts of the country to the Internet. Soon enough, more and more services and information transitioned online. The governance system began to enter the digitisation phase, so did the commercial and private sector. Today, communication is largely digital—citizen to citizen, business to consumer, government to citizen, and vice versa.

As more and more people went online, more and more government service and information moved online too. The challenge, however, was government departments were not communicating with each other. So while technology was leveraged by the government to create channels of communication between the government and the citizens, the government failed to account for the need for intra-government communication. Or to build the required infrastructure at the same pace as was required.

So while the government was able to collect citizen data, it wasn't able to build a comprehensive database to offer holistic governance services in a seamless manner. The siloed approach of various government bodies to go online, ended up causing problems for the larger population, the marginalised population of the country. They were no longer just "illiterate", they were also digitally disconnected yet digitally mapped.

Let me tell you about Bhure Lal, a poor man who lives in a village in Rajasthan. His identity is now matched to a unique identification number that is required for him to access most public services and entitlements. As a citizen of India, he has the right to food, right to information, and right to entitlements. Yet, when he has to avail his ration supply, the biometric machine must identify his finger print and match it to the Aadhaar database on Cloud. However, on several occasions, his thumb impression is not accepted by the database in one go. There could be several reasons for this, ranging from lack of electricity or Internet supply to rugged thumb lines. Despite a digital identify, in a country of not the most efficient digital infrastructure, when his biometrics aren't recognised, he is denied his ration.

So while we accept that digital media is here to stay and revolution access to services and information—especially through smartphones and multimedia platforms—and digital citizenship promises to bring in a lot of efficiency and effectiveness to the governance systems, it also creates marginalisation and further exclusion if digital infrastructure is unable to match the scope of digital citizenship. And so before we start celebrating a digital India, we must question the availability of required infrastructure for the masses, 67 per cent of who live in rural India.

Osama Manzar is founder of Digital Empowerment Foundation, the organisation which has digitally empowered more than 7.5 million poor people in India, across 600 locations spread in 126 districts in 23 states.





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