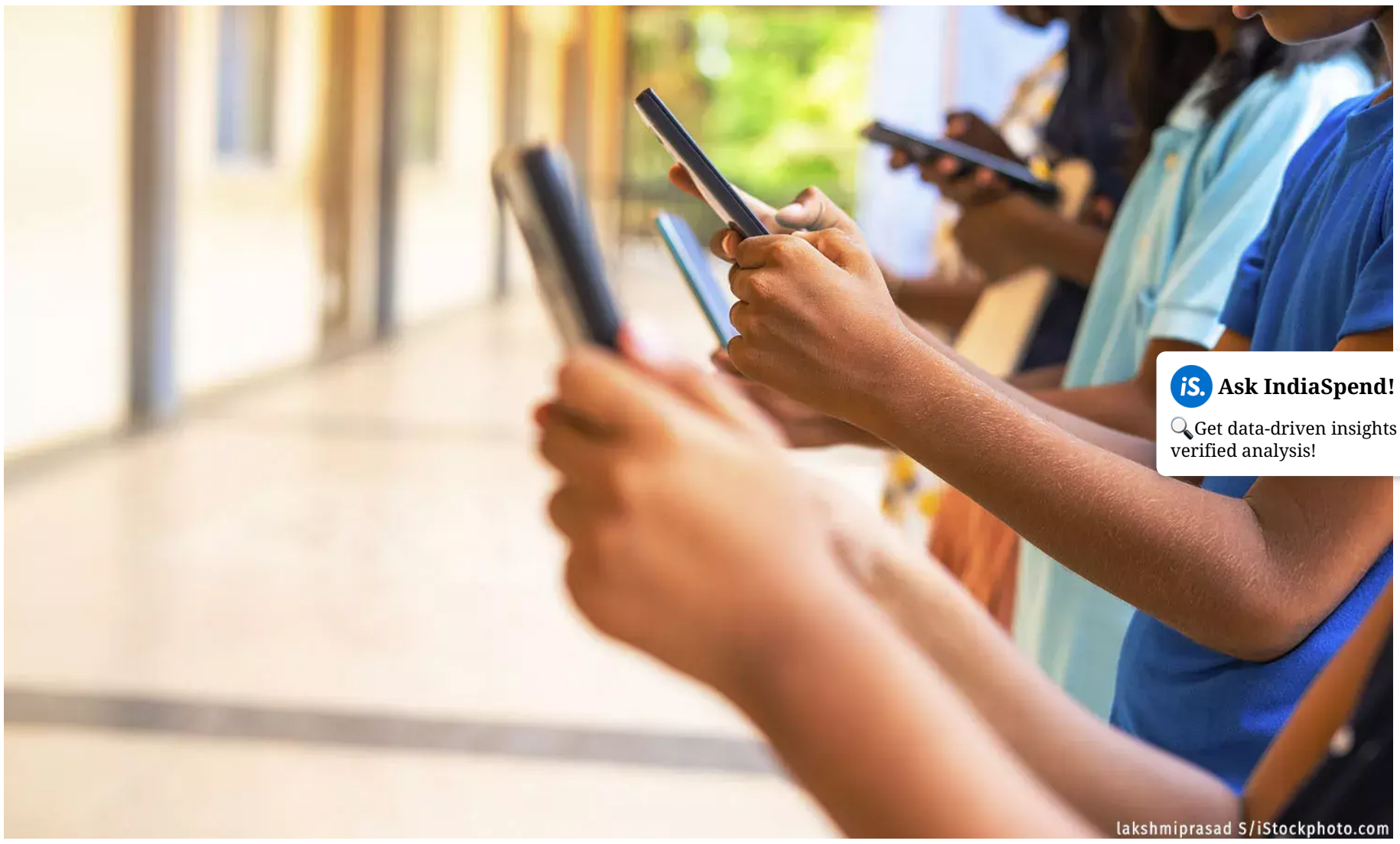
The Case For Better Media, Digital And Information Literacy In Schools

India has over 600 million smart phone users but questions remain on their digital, media and information literacy

By Niharika Singh | 31 Mar, 2023



New Delhi: In 2021, Nazneen, who uses just her first name, joined a Media And Information Literacy (MIL) training conducted at Ideosync Media Combine (IMC), a non-governmental organisation based in Faridabad, on a friend's recommendation. The friend had told her, they 'teach you to use your smartphone properly, change privacy settings and fill forms online'.

"I did not have computer classes in school, I don't think the school had a computer for students to use," said Nazeen, who is now a full-time technical trainer at IMC. "During college I never saw the face of the computer lab because the semester went into a lockdown, but I was using my father's phone to take classes and I wanted to learn more about how to use it."

With growing mobile phone and internet use in India, along with instances of online scams, harassment and misinformation, experts say Media and Information Literacy (MIL), beyond learning just the basic functions of a device, is critical.

The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MEITY) defines digital literacy as "the ability of individuals and communities to understand and use digital technologies for meaningful actions within life situations". Its own programmes for digital literacy, such as the Pradhan Mantri Grameen Digital Saksharta Abhiyan (PMGDISHA), says its learning outcomes include using digital devices for accessing, creating, and sharing information, appreciating the role of digital technology and using the internet--but in fact, measured smaller outcomes such as making five digital transactions and one email verification.

Further, "there is no school or college in India which offers MIL as a course or integrates it in curriculum", says Osama Manzar, founder of the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF), a Delhi-based nonprofit working on digital literacy.

India's digital literacy missions

In 2014, the Union government implemented the "National Digital Literacy Mission" (NDLM) with a target to make 1 million Indian citizens digitally literate. In December the same year, a second scheme called the "Digital Saksharta Abhiyan" (DISHA) was implemented with a target of 4.25 million. DISHA was different from NDLM in that it aimed to train government functionaries including Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA), Anganwadi and Fair Price Shop workers and was focused on rural India.

"The whole idea at that point of time was largely initiated by Intel," says Manzar. "E-literacy and adoption of technology in South Asia was strategically significant for Intel." Intel partnered with DEF and The National Association For Software And Service Companies (NASSCOM) to initiate NDLM. The project worked simultaneously in villages receiving fibre networks under the National Optical Fibre Network (NOFN) programme launched by Bharat Broadband Nigam Limited.

"This push towards digital was there for most of the world," said Gunjan Sharma, an Associate Professor at the School of Education at Dr. B. R. Ambedkar University of Delhi. "It was not a national development but a global development. You find the same jargon, same lexicon and rationale being presented almost everywhere."

"Digital literacy was considered essential to drive the upcoming digital revolution or digitisation. But between the time it took to conceive and format the programme and the time it actually got implemented, the scheme (NDLM) had already become outdated," said Manzar.

The scheme had two levels of training with modules such as 'introduction to the internet', 'basic use of multimedia', and 'communication using the internet'. But, Manzar said, it lacked comprehensive device and behavioural literacy of the mobile phone, which had become the primary device in India by then, rather than the computer. "The scheme also took the route of a typical education system intervention; it became literacy by certification and by 2016 it had simply turned into a testing barrier."

"At the end of the day it's a government programme," says Dinesh Tyagi, who retired in August 2022 as the India Managing Director of Common Service Centre (CSC) E-Governance. CSC is the implementing body for all three schemes. "You have to test what you are trained in. An examination system was designed by independent bodies, the National Institute of Electronics and Information Technology (NIELIT) and the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS). It was the first time a remotely proctored examination was done and Aadhaar was used to make sure there are no duplicate registrations."

The news website *The Wire* reported that the formalities--which included registering Aadhaar and bank details, seeking approval from the sarpanch for panchayat documents and verifying the email address--burdened the trainer in completing formalities, rather than focus on training.

In February 2017, the government approved another digital literacy scheme for rural India, PMGDISHA, focused on cashless transactions through mobile phones.

PMGDISHA aims to make 60,000,000 people in rural India digitally literate. The programme was until March 31, 2019 but was extended until March 31, 2023. "PMGDISHA is yet to close. It was extended because of the setbacks faced during Covid-19," says Tyagi.

Rolling out similar, multiple schemes in a short span of time created confusion in the minds of intended beneficiaries and made monitoring and evaluation complicated, a 2019 review of the National Digital Literacy Mission by the Standing Committee on Information Technology found.

"None of the schemes were running parallel," says Tyagi. "These were sequential. There was no other scheme on digital literacy being done by other departments, which might be why the outcomes were somewhat similar, but NDLM focus was urban-rural, and PMGDISHA was implemented in rural areas. The government focused on the rural areas and the urban areas were supported through CSR partnerships."

The standing committee also asked MEITY to ensure adequate representation of disadvantaged groups, such as Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs).

"While the standing committee's observations were largely to focus on the marginalised sections of society, that was already being covered. More than 50% trained in the PMGDISHA were women and in proportion to the population to SC/ST, a large number were represented," claims Tyagi.

"There were a few good outcomes from the programmes", said Manzar, "one of them being the willingness of the government to adopt and assign a budget to the states to invest and spend on digital literacy."

Media and information literacy in schools

But digital literacy has to go beyond just learning how to use a device or the internet, say experts, and should include media and information literacy.

In addition, rather than just separate programmes, the standing committee said that "the government may also examine adding a component of digital literacy to general literacy programs and continuing digital literacy program on an ongoing basis with particular focus on young people".

There is a framework developed by UNESCO for policymakers, educators, information and media professionals, to enable people to critically and effectively engage with information, digital and communication landscapes.

Venu Arora, director of Ideosync Media Combine, the organisation that organised the training Nazneen was a part of. She has been advocating for the addition of MIL competencies as a formal skill set in middle school education curriculum. "India's education system has still not geared up to talk about media in a manner that would inform young people of what is truly happening in the media economy and in the news."

In the 16-week workshop that her organisation, Ideosync Media Combine, conducts with young people, sessions include learning about the basics of smartphones, fact-checking, misinformation and disinformation, targeted advertising, digital privacy, security and safety, new media technologies and audio/video productions.

In a session on new media technologies, attending participants learn about the advancement in technology such as facial recognition and how they might be using it every day on their devices but also be able to be critical about its utilisation in public infrastructure. "What MIL enables you to do is to think critically," she explains.

Digital inequality

A further concern is digital inequality, which experts say should be addressed in policy and programmes on digital and media literacy.

The National Family Health Survey-5, conducted between 2019 and 2021, found that between the ages of 15-49 years, 48.7% of men and 24.6% of women in rural India said they had used the internet, compared to 72.5% of men and 51.8% of women in urban India. The survey also found that 69.4% women in urban India and 46.6% women in rural India had a mobile that they themselves used.

Based on access, the purposes for which people are able to use digital access, and access to media and information literacy, "we might see a remarginalisation of people based on how they are engaging with technologies and how much they are able to gain form these technologies", says Arora.

Just after she completed her training, Nazneen began working as a community mobiliser for the programme and would frequently speak with residents about MIL. "If I wanted to encourage girls in the community to join the programme, I knew I had to also speak with their parents, especially the mother first. Usually, it is the brother who has the phone all day and the girls would get to use it later in the evening on their return," she said. "I would take it as my job to convince the mothers that their daughters also have a need for the mobile phone and that the training would help them to use it for their benefit."

"I have seen my friends who have received a tablet in school from the Haryana government never have the confidence to use it because of the fear that they might do something wrong to it. Instead, they would ask their brother to use the applications in it for them," Nazneen says.

Other than gender inequality, there are several reasons girls and women might have lower internet and digital device use.

"Once, this trainee was caught by her brother. She had been uploading her dance videos on social media. The family was very angry with her," said Nazneen. "But she liked dancing, and we wanted her to share it on social media, so we sat down with her and made her a new account and taught her to make it private, how to hide contact details and to change the settings so that her email ID cannot be used to look her up."

But mindsets are slowly changing. Nazneen is happy that more girls have been successful in negotiating with their parents and now own a mobile phone. "Now that I see so many more girls with phones than before, I think it's because of online classes that they could demand it, otherwise it's not that easy for girls to ask for a phone for themselves."

Girls also self-censor because of the violence faced on the internet. The National Crime Records Bureau recorded 10,730 cyber crimes against women in 2021. The highest number of cases were recorded under cyber pornography, cyber stalking, fake profile, and defamation. Nearly nine in 10 women restrict their online activity, limiting their access to employment, education, healthcare, and community, a study by the Economist Intelligence Unit suggests.

There has also been a dramatic increase in online searches for harassment such as 'doxxing', 'grooming' etc. during Covid-19 in India, according to The Digital Intelligence Report (2021) by the International Center for Research on Women. Some of the frequent phrases searched for in urban cities such as New Delhi are: "advice on dealing with online trolls", "who stalks my Instagram". Frequent phrases looked up online by women in rural India include "Instagram hacked" and "Facebook hacked".

In one of the sessions that Nazneen attends, the girls are discussing gender and the internet. They agree on how unsafe it can be online, but they have also learnt how to 'report' an account and that having their friends also report the same account increases the chance of it being reviewed and removed. They use the mechanisms of social media platforms to 'control' their comments, views and privacy. Some of them have had to delete their accounts more than once but are back again, while others have, at some point, used pseudonyms and generic photographs, such as that of a sunrise, as their display pictures.

"Now, of course, the issues will be security, especially cyber security," says Tyagi on the next digital literacy focus. "Some parts of the curricula were included in PMGDISHA but they were limited. What we have suggested to the government is to have a trained cyber security support partner in every village. Preferably it should be a woman, with whom people can talk about cyber hacking, bullying and other things in confidence."

Misinformation

With growing misinformation online and on social media, MIL courses need to help users navigate through lies and inaccurate information.

In 2022, BOOM, a digital journalism initiative, conducted 1,135 fact-checks of messages making the rounds on social media and WhatsApp. It reported an increase in misreporting in mainstream media and rise in virality of scripted and dramatised videos. [Editor's note: IndiaSpend founder Govindraj Ethiraj is also the founder of BOOM.]

Another report analysing the distribution of misinformation identified WhatsApp as the most important source for the spread of false images.

"Some people might take it [WhatsApp messages] at face value and a very small minority might ask for the source and the politics of the source information," says Usha Raman, a Professor in the Department of Communication, University of Hyderabad.

Manzar suggests MIL would first mean to be able to understand the digital device as both a media and a medium. "I am an active consumer and producer of content, and not only should I be able to have full-fledged literacy about hardware and software, but I should also realise the implications of making messages and the effects it has on people."

Teaching media and information literacy

There are many models of promoting media literacy across the world, some which focus primarily on news literacy while others, like that in Finland, embed media and information literacy across public departments. The National Audiovisual Institute (KAVI), a government agency under the Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland, is in charge of implementing the national media education policy. Implementation is distributed across departments: While the Ministry of Education and Culture works on children and adolescents' media literacy skills in school, the Ministry of Justice works to identify political disinformation.

The Australian Media Literacy Alliance (AMLA) advocates using public institutions. "Because we have strong public cultural institutions in Australia--National Broadcasters, National Museums, and a huge network of libraries across the country--we felt that this existing infrastructure should be used to promote MIL," said Tanya Notley, Associate Professor in Communication at Western Sydney University and the Deputy Chair of AMLA.

"We wanted to avoid making MIL the sole responsibility of the government and instead work with public institutions which have a sustainable infrastructure, are continuously creating content and are highly equipped for supporting teacher training as well."

Sharma contends it will be difficult to consider the models used in Finland and Australia in India because of demographic, economic and social differences. "If one does at all have to draw on the model Finland follows, then it should be done across the entire education sector. Finland has a very heavy public investment in education, extremely high teachers' autonomy; teachers are permanent, and the digital is not a replacement of the physical teaching learning space."

On the other hand, in India "one of the major reasons for the failure of our public education system has been a very low investment in teacher education by the government. It is in such bad shape that let alone technology, there is no significant training on comprehensive sensitisation training for gender and disability to teachers."

In India, Arora says, some aspects of MIL--fact checking and understanding new kinds of media--are covered in the media and journalism school curriculum. "The UNESCO framework helps but we need to do more and train educators first to accept and adapt the framework. It doesn't matter if you are taking an engineering or medical degree; you should in your school curricula have one module that should be compulsory for you to take to understand the media environment today," she says.

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Niharika Singh

Niharika Singh is an independent researcher based in New Delhi. Her work focuses on digitalisation, gender and urbanisation.

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