

Democratising Education in India: Breaking barriers and building bridges

By K Ganesh | Jan 25, 2024

Democratising education in India means making it inclusive, equitable, and accessible to all, irrespective of socio-economic background. Here's how it can be done



[CAPTION]Democratising education in India means making it inclusive, equitable, and accessible to all, irrespective of socio-economic background. Image: Shutterstock[/CAPTION]

While India has many top educational institutions of world standard, like the IITs, IIMs, AIIMS and other top colleges, beyond the first tier, there is a large vacuum in quality higher education opportunities. This is especially true for Tier II and smaller cities and towns. The top institutions offer admission to a fraction of the aspirants who are privileged enough to afford it. With a burgeoning population and a dynamic socio-economic fabric, there is an urgency to bridge the chasm between the academically privileged and the masses and make education accessible and affordable, transcending traditional barriers.

Education is a fundamental right and a critical tool for socio-economic mobility. Democratising education in

India means making it inclusive, equitable, and accessible to all, irrespective of socio-economic background. This is not just a moral imperative but an economic one, too. According to a World Bank report, equitable education can substantially increase India's GDP growth.

India, with its vast and diverse population, faces a unique challenge in education.

One-size-fits-all approach: The Indian education system often operates on a uniform curriculum, not considering individual learning paces and styles. This leads to a lack of personalised education, which is crucial for effective learning. The standard classroom training model ignores the variance in the background, prior knowledge and readiness of the student and cannot be customised for individual students to cater to their unique requirements,

Scarcity of quality content and educators: There is a significant shortage of qualified teachers, especially in remote areas.

Dated content not meeting current industry needs: This is especially true in management and technology, where the changes are substantial with the advent of the Internet, AI, Machine learning, Robotics and Smartphones,

Limited access to premier institutions: The hyper-competitive nature of entrance exams to top institutions, like the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) or the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET), creates high pressure and is often unattainable for many. Only a miniscule fraction of aspirants get admission to the top institutes. Many examinations need expensive entrance examination coaching for years, which is unaffordable to most students.

The rural-urban divide: The top institutions are predominantly in major cities. The costs of top-quality higher education can be daunting for most Indians if they need to move to another location.

In this context, digital learning, or online education, can be a game changer.

The advent of digital learning platforms has begun to bridge the educational divide. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), e-learning portals, and government initiatives like SWAYAM (Study Webs of Active Learning for Young Aspiring Minds) are pivotal in this transformation. These platforms offer a range of courses from top universities at minimal or no cost.

The Indian government's push towards digital education, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, has been commendable. SWAYAM, for instance, has provided over 2,000 courses, with over 25 million enrolments. This indicates a growing acceptance and reliance on online education as a viable alternative, making quality education accessible to learners nationwide.

Personalisation of Learning: Digital platforms offer personalised learning experiences, catering to different learning styles and paces.

Expanding Access to Quality Education: Through online courses and digital resources, students in remote areas can access top-quality education.

Reducing Competitive Pressures: With more avenues for quality education, the pressure to secure seats in elite institutions can decrease, promoting a healthier educational environment.

Providing Flexibility: Learning at the place and pace of one's choice through online courses, self-assessments, peer group discussions, learning from mentors and listening to practitioners and leaders.

The future of democratised education in India hinges on sustainable and inclusive strategies. It requires a multi-faceted approach involving government policies, private sector participation, and community engagement. Investment in digital infrastructure, teacher training, and developing localised content are key areas to focus on. Additionally, integrating technology with traditional classroom teaching can create a blended learning environment, catering to a wider spectrum of learners.

The steps taken today towards democratising education will empower individuals and propel the nation towards a brighter, more inclusive future. As Nelson Mandela famously said, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."

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