



Making education accessible

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(Mains GS 2 : Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health, Education, Human Resources)

Context:

- Access and affordability continue to plague teachers and students alike one year after the COVID-19 outbreak.
- Teachers, administrators and policymakers are all working, but the results are not encouraging.
- People at both ends of the classroom seem to be going through a mere exercise with precious little to show for their efforts.

Problems with online education:

- Online education hampers learning along with exams which lose their credibility.
- The cost to health with continuous exposure to screens and the dent on financial resources are significant for both teachers and students.
- Online learning seems to be a case of working mindlessly, rather than working smart.
- With physical classes out of the reckoning, access to education is now almost exclusively online.
- Internet penetration in India is 50% and that reveals one reason for the less-than-efficient achievement in the online education sector.
- Every single teacher-educator and student, even in the metros, has experienced poor connectivity. In the rural areas online access remains an aspiration.

The two influential agencies

- The Government of India owns the airwaves. Prasar Bharati is India's broadcasting corporation handling both radio and television in India.
- All India Radio (AIR) is blessed with 470 broadcasting centres which cover 92% of the country's geographical area and 99.19% of our population.
- Doordarshan (DD) handles television, online and mobile broadcasting across our country and the world with 34 satellite channels, 17 well-equipped studios in State capitals and 49 studio centres in other cities.

- With such resources, AIR and DD can be used to broadcast lessons, given that education is one of the three functions of the two agencies under the Prasar Bharati Act.
- These two agencies can be reinvented to cater to the needs of the education sector.

Towards meaningful solution:

- To begin with, educational broadcasts for classes 10, 11 and 12 can be done over AIR and DD in the ratio 4:1 (four hours of radio and one hour of TV).
- Those courses which need demonstration and where seen/observed physical activity is important can be broadcast on TV. This calls for some training and some effort, but it can be done.
- There are two benefits from this: one, we will be able to reduce for our teachers and students the strain of having to stare at their screens endlessly;
- Second, with AIR and DD being free, the heavy drain on financial resources will be drastically reduced.
- If regular radio is not enough, we also have digital radio spawning FM stations leased out to private players for a fee and several FM stations that are run by NGOs, universities and such agencies.

Training teachers for new role:

- Policymakers should involve teachers training in their planning.
- Training can be provided by a set of master trainers over a month for teachers who will turn into scriptwriters and programmers.
- These teachers can also be taught to create appropriate tools for evaluation over radio and TV.
- The Central and State educational boards should be roped in, to support, monitor and provide feedback to improve the system.

Free hours of Internet:

- The government could consider asking Internet Service Providers to provide many hours of free Internet usage to teachers and students.
- This will not be easy but the government should call the shots and take a decision that is in the interest of the people.

Conclusion:

- Online education opens up a lot of possibilities for students and teachers alike.
- Yet, it may also widen the inequalities in the socio-economic fabric of India.
- Thus, all our policies and interventions with regard to online education should strive to be inclusive by providing access to the internet and making AIR and DD work for the benefit of the common students.