

Empower seniors digitally

It's vital for wellness, full participation in society

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Recently, Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the expanded Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana to cover 60 million eligible senior citizens, allocating 12,850 crore for the initiative. But to access the benefits, and utilise the other benefits of digital public infrastructure, senior citizens will require the requisite skills to use technology. Digital inclusion is crucial to ensure that elderly citizens can navigate the digital processes associated not only with this scheme but also to enjoy the other benefits of the digital world.

The internet has transformed how the older generation participates in society, whether it is in talking to their children, buying medicines, or improving their general physical and mental well-being. Despite the potential benefits, a substantial 'digital divide' persists among older adults. There are many factors that contribute to this.

WHY THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

First, there is limited financial resources to procure digital devices and internet plans and unequal access to technology, particularly in rural areas or low income communities. Second, is the lack of digital literacy and skills. Navigating the complex interfaces with both IT software and hardware can be challenging for older generations. Third, cognitive limitations faced by most people in the older generation, including declining eyesight, hearing and other age-related cognitive decline that has impacted the ability to learn new skills and remember complex instructions.

And lastly, there is excessive fear contributed by rising online scams and cyber threats which can deter the older generation from using digital tools. Recent reports show cyber criminals deploying increasingly sophisticated technology and deceptive methods to frequently target older people causing them significant financial and emotional distress.

India is experiencing a significant demographic shift, with a growing proportion of its population entering the 60+ age bracket. An Agewell Foundation Survey has found that approximately 85.8 percent respondents were found to be digitally and computer illiterate and, of this, 76.5 percent were elderly men and 95 per cent, elderly women. This trend underscores the urgent need for digital inclusion among older adults.

India's goal of a \$1 trillion digital economy by 2028 necessitates a comprehensive approach to digital inclusion. To ensure a smart ageing population, there's a need for a comprehensive plan to help the older generation navigate the digital world confidently and participate fully in society. Firstly, designing ICTs (information and

communications technologies) with accessibility and universal design principles in mind that can cater to diverse needs of the older generation. High-speed, affordable internet can transform the lives of all persons, including the elderly as this would provide access to online services like telemedicine, e-learning, digital payments, etc.

Initiatives like PM-WANI can play a vital role in expanding internet connectivity and bridge the digital divide - for instance, even booking a cab or even making a call would be easier with public Wi-Fi facilities. During Covid-19 and beyond, there were a few NGOs that organised specific workshops and 'Digital Literacy Classes' for the older generation.

Lastly, there is a clear need for more targeted policies and programmes for digital inclusivity amongst older citizens. While Digital India Mission, National Digital Literacy Mission and other State government initiatives for digital literacy are there, it is essential to have a dedicated policy at the Central level focusing on digital literacy amongst the elderly.

At this juncture, policymakers, industry and civil society organisations should focus on leveraging ICTs to empower senior citizens.

The writer is President, Broadband India Forum. Views are personal. Research inputs by Mira Swaminathan.