

DIGITAL

INCLUSION &

EMPOWERMENT

IN INDIA

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	1
Introduction	4
About the DiSTO India chapter	6
About the Symposium	7
Day 1	8
Introduction and Context Setting	9
Keynote Address	10
<b>Panel 1:</b> Digital Inclusion, Socio-Economic Inequalities and Labour Markets	12
<b>Panel 2:</b> Digital Literacy and Skills Facilitating Learning and Government Services	14
<b>Panel 3:</b> Impact of the digital on Everyday Lives	16
Day 2	18
<b>Panel 1:</b> Digital Infrastructure development and Security	19
<b>Panel 2:</b> Digital Financial Inclusion and Innovation	21
<b>Panel 3:</b> Digital Inclusion Strategies for Marginalised Communities	23
Way Forward	25

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The symposium on Digital Inclusion and Empowerment in India, the inaugural event for the DiSTO India Chapter, was organised by the Policy and Development Advisory Group (PDAG) in New Delhi on 24-25th July 2023, in collaboration with the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU). The DiSTO India Chapter is a new addition to the global DiSTO (from Digital Skills to Tangible Outcomes) initiative at the Department of Media and Communications, LSE.

The two-day symposium was held to gather knowledge from researchers, field practitioners and policymakers about their findings on the digital landscape, the digitally disadvantaged sections and how the prevailing inequalities could be addressed. It would further help in informing the research that is conducted under the DiSTO India chapter.

Following a keynote address by Prof. Ellen Helsper, Professor, Digital Inequalities, on DiSTO's research around digital inequalities across the world, the symposium's first day delved into three-themed discussions with researchers, which were:

- 1 Digital Inclusion, Socio-economic Inequalities and Labour Markets:** While automation is taking away low-skilled jobs, particularly of marginalised communities, contextually upgraded skilling by the government can help them access better job opportunities. Research suggests that women prefer remote/hybrid work as it helps them balance their household responsibilities. However, this might lead to a wider gender wage gap as lack of physical presence in the office has been found to lead to stagnation of job roles and reduced promotions.

## **2** *Digital Literacy and Skills Facilitating Learning and Government Services:*

The symposium underscored the critical importance of digital literacy in contemporary society. Proficiency in utilising digital devices and navigating online content is now fundamental for active participation in various aspects of modern life. Nevertheless, it was emphasised that access to and proficiency in digital tools is not uniform and is significantly influenced by factors like gender, geographic location, age, employment status, and economic standing. The symposium highlighted the pivotal role played by both governmental and private sector initiatives in mitigating these disparities. These programs provide essential training and resources, enabling individuals and communities to overcome digital barriers.

## **3** *Impact of the Digital on Everyday Lives:*

The pervasive influence of digital technology has reshaped our daily routines, presenting both opportunities and challenges. Blurred boundaries between personal and professional life have led to widespread mental fatigue among professionals. Children, growing up in this digital era, face unique hurdles in developing decision-making skills. Gender dynamics have also been influenced, with women gaining access to information, empowering them within their communities. Men, too, are experiencing shifts in their perspectives on women's roles. The DiSTO symposium highlighted the importance of critical digital literacy, encouraging an informed approach to technology use. Rather than advocating for disconnection, it emphasised understanding the potential impacts, with special consideration for those more vulnerable. Our focus should be on maximising the benefits while supporting those negatively affected by these changes.



On the second day of the symposium, following a keynote address by Prof. Helsper on DiSTO's research around digital inequalities across the world, the day had three panel discussions with policy makers and practitioners along the following themes:

- 1** **Digital Infrastructure Development and Security:** Ethical guidelines for data collection, regular impact assessments by companies and institutions to manage risks, inclusion of digital literacy in education, and transparency in government data usage are required for maintaining data privacy and protection. Regular upskilling and awareness in terms of cyber security can help in the reduction of cybercrimes and improve access.
- 2** **Digital Financial Inclusion and Innovation:** An assisted model of digitisation, with the help of grassroots functionaries is necessary to encompass all communities and groups of people. This could help in improving access to government schemes. Public sector banks which have played a pivotal role in driving financial inclusion in rural areas need expansion to serve the remote populations better. Innovation with respect to user-centric design and ease of access needs to be encouraged.
- 3** **Digital Inclusion Strategies for Marginalised Communities:** The user interface of applications and content needs to be customised to meet the needs of marginalised communities by increased participation of these communities in co-creating content and interfaces. The findings from research conducted on such communities should be shared with them, the gaps redressed and recommendations implemented on the ground.

## KEY OUTCOMES



To engage and learn from researchers, practitioners and policymakers about digital inequality discourse, research and practice in the country



To identify and engage with potential partners for the DiSTO India chapter

# INTRODUCTION

In this era of digitisation, access to technology and digital resources has emerged as a pivotal determinant of success and well-being. However, not all individuals or communities possess equal access or the necessary skills to participate fully in the digital realm. This disparity in access and skills and opportunity to engage with relevant content is what we refer to as socio-digital inequality.

In an increasingly digitised world, where technology shapes our daily interactions and access to information is a keystroke away, it is imperative to consider the far-reaching implications of digital inequality. Digital inequality encompasses several dimensions, including disparities in internet accessibility, digital literacy levels, and the availability of robust digital infrastructure and content. Despite significant technological advancements made within India, a considerable segment of its population still lacks internet connectivity and faces challenges when attempting to acquire essential digital competencies. This divide impedes inclusive development efforts while further exacerbating pre-existing social and economic inequalities.



“The term ‘socio-digital inequalities’ refers to the systematic differences in the ability and opportunity for people to beneficially use (or decide not to use) ICTs, while avoiding negative outcomes of digital engagement now and in the future”

- Prof. Ellen Helsper, LSE

## DIGITAL ACCESS IN INDIA

### Gender Gap in Internet usage



Figure 1: Gender Gap in Digital Access in India

National Family Health Survey-5 data [from 2019-2021] assessed men’s and women’s internet use for the first time and found that only one in three women in India (33%) have ever used the internet, compared to more than half (57%) of men.

The need to address the issue of digital inequality arises from its profound and extensive consequences. The digital gap exacerbates existing social disparities, impeding marginalised communities from fully engaging in the socio-economic and civic fabric. In a nation where digital platforms are increasingly essential for accessing vital services, education, healthcare, and government initiatives, exclusion from this digital realm places individuals at a distinct disadvantage. Furthermore, digital inequality hinders the achievement of broader development objectives and obstructs progress towards establishing an equitable society. There are universal challenges but also nationally specific barriers to equal participation in an increasingly digital society such as India (see figure 1)

## SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CHALLENGES TO DIGITAL INCLUSION IN INDIA

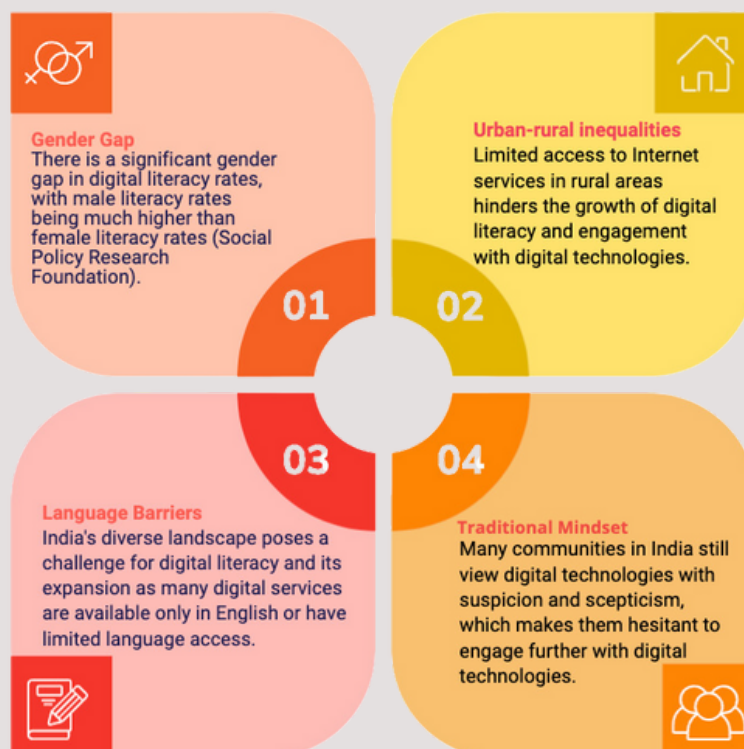
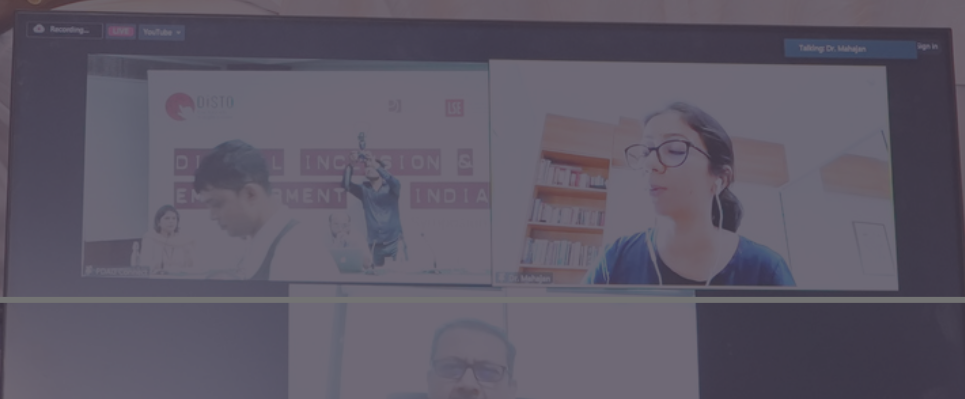


Figure 2: Social and Cultural Challenges to Digital Inclusion in India

# ABOUT THE DISTO INDIA CHAPTER

Despite the significant technological advancements in recent years, a large portion of India's population still faces limited access to the internet and digital devices. Women and marginalised communities are particularly digitally disadvantaged and that creates further disparities in opportunities and access to information.

To delve deeper into the underlying causes of the digital divide in the Indian context and explore potential solutions for digital empowerment in India, PDAG initiated a collaborative effort along with Prof Ellen Helsper at the Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and Prof KS Arul Selvan, Director, School of Journalism and New Media, IGNOU to organise a symposium on “Digital Inclusion and Empowerment in India”. The 2-day symposium brought together esteemed academicians, policymakers, experts and stakeholders from India to discuss the extent and challenges of the digital divide and discuss strategies to bridge the gap in terms of access and opportunities for marginalised communities.





# ABOUT THE SYMPOSIUM

The two-day symposium featured a series of engaging panel discussions around the theme of digital inclusion and empowerment. The panel was graced by a diverse range of participants, including esteemed academicians, seasoned practitioners and influential policymakers.

The collective insights of the panellists and participants helped unpack the nuances around the prevailing digital divide and deliberate upon pathways to ensure digital inclusion and empower the marginalised communities.

The symposium's first day delved into crucial topics surrounding labour markets, digital literacy and skills, and the impact of the digital on everyday lives. The panellists on day 1 had been drawn from academia, with each coming from various inter-sectional areas of research and expertise.

On the second day, the focus was towards critical themes such as digital infrastructure, financial inclusion, and inclusion strategies for marginalised communities. Day 2 saw participation from policymakers and practitioners, representatives from CSOs as well as industry stakeholders. The panellists examined significant initiatives, shared best practices, and addressed the barriers to success that exist within the Indian context. We purposefully centred our attention on SDG 5, making Gender Equality a prevailing theme throughout the event.

## SNIPPETS FROM SYMPOSIUM





# DAY 1





# INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT SETTING

Arindam Banerjee, co-founder and partner of the Policy and Development Advisory Group (PDAG), commenced the Symposium with his opening statements, setting the tone for the event. Some of the key points mentioned by him were:

1

Highlighting the issues around adopting a digital only approach and how it can end up being exclusionary, he cited the Supreme Court's special bench's judgement on online COWIN registrations to access COVID-19 vaccines in India. He quoted the bench, saying, "There is a digital divide between the urban and rural households. Any kind of policy implementation, relying on a digital portal will always be unable to meet the actual targets. Marginalised sections of the society will always bear the brunt of this digital divide and it potentially in the near future will have serious implications on the fundamental right to equality, right to dignity and right to health." Such challenges need to be addressed concurrently with the advancements in digital technology by making it a part of policy discussions, with the aim of ensuring inclusivity for the broader population.

2

The array of social and cultural challenges, encompassing gender and spatial inequalities, language barriers, and limited digital infrastructure in certain regions as potential obstacles towards digital engagement. He emphasised the need for collective efforts to formulate solutions and engage in discussions pertaining to these challenges throughout the two-day symposium.

# KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Prof. Ellen Helsper conveyed her excitement about the engagement with a region that has embraced the objectives of the DiSTO initiative across practical implementation, policy formulation, and intellectual discourse. In her work through the DiSTO project globally, valuable insights into the origins and ramifications of digital inequalities have been found, and she hoped that the DiSTO India chapter, with the inaugural symposium, further inform the objectives with its distinctive challenges and opportunities.

Some of the key points made by her were:

- 1 “Digital Inclusion is not about just engaging with systems or not engaging with systems ..., but really about the engagement in ways that allows you to obtain beneficial outcomes across all domains of everyday life and to avoid the negative outcomes for yourself and others.”
- 2 Through the DiSTO research conducted in various other parts of the world, Prof. Helsper shed light upon her findings regarding access, digital literacy and digital engagement- the three parameters bearing importance with respect to the digital ecosystem. Systematic differences between groups, countries and regions (based on socio-economic, socio-cultural and other characteristics), unequal distribution of resources and the history of a region, all have an effect on the digital.
- 3 She highlighted that findings from the DiSTO research showcase how access, digital literacy and digital engagement are interconnected. Measuring access might seem to be the easiest thing to do, but potential access does not equal actual access. An example used here was how a smartphone’s usage in a family differs. The smartphone might go out with the male member of the family, leaving the adult female in the household with not much access. A male child’s access has been found to be prioritised over a female child’s having a direct impact on education.

4

Access without the necessary skills and knowledge is unlike an active or even a passive digital engagement. With the right functional and critical digital literacy, uptake of access could be improved, depending upon the need and ability of the user. However, people belonging to different social groups even with the same access and skills have been shown to have different outcomes.

5

Throughout her address, Prof. Helsper aimed to shed light on models and historical perspectives regarding digital inclusion and inequalities. She delved into the research methodologies and the array of approaches employed to gauge digital skills. Prof. Helsper acknowledged that considerable knowledge had been gained through collaboration with global partners, including the official eight partners of the DiSTO project, as well as collaborators from diverse countries like India.

## SNIPPETS FROM SYMPOSIUM



## PANEL 1: DIGITAL INCLUSION, SOCIO-ECONOMIC INEQUALITIES AND LABOUR MARKETS

The first panel was moderated by Ms Akshi Chawla, Editor, Centre for Economic Data and Analysis (CEDA), Ashoka University. She was joined by Dr Kanika Mahajan, Associate Professor of Economics at Ashoka University; Dr. Shishir Kumar Jha, Professor, Ashank Desai Centre for Policy Studies, IIT Bombay; Dr. Sona Mitra, Principal Economist, IWWAGE; and Mr. Vibodh Parthasarathi, Associate Professor at the Centre for Culture Media & Governance in Jamia Millia Islamia University. The discussion aimed to bring forward the impact of digital exclusion on socio-economic inequalities and labour markets, and actionable strategies that could help bridge the digital divide.

The key takeaways from the discussion included:

- 1 | Digitisation has moved to an increasing implementation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) which poses a chance that certain kinds of labour done by women and other marginalised communities will get displaced within the labour force due to redundancy as a result of automation and/or lack of skills to effectively engage with digital systems.
- 2 | The panel also elaborated that women consider remote work and hybrid work to create a balance between their professional and personal responsibilities. But lack of visibility in the office often results in reduced promotions as well as stagnation in job roles. This can widen the existing wage divide between women and men leading to women leaving these jobs due to lack of job satisfaction. On the other hand, employers may think that remote work reduces productivity, and therefore, have little incentive to provide that option.
- 3 | Gig work platforms and other digital spaces often reflect the existing biases in the society by attaching conventional roles to certain castes. Therefore, the panel suggested that skill training is needed to generate better employment opportunities to mitigate the ethnicity and caste-based biases being mirrored on digital platforms.
- 4 | There was emphasis on government schemes focusing on skills training and apprenticeships including providing and sustaining the required infrastructure which would enable women to continue the training systematically and continuously.

# BLURBS FROM THE SPEAKERS

“Women only continue with their jobs if they have decent pay and if it sits well with the family to be able to overcome the cost associated with the woman going out.”

- Dr Kanika Mahajan, Associate Professor of Economics, Ashoka University



“If our very own data is not used for addressing public concerns, as it has been clear in many geographies, and has been hijacked for a completely different purpose (endless advertising of products), the million-dollar question is what is the point of this digital inclusion?”

- Dr Shishir Kumar Jha, Professor, Ashank Desai Centre for Policy Studies, IIT Bombay



“The paradox of the data economy is that while data is considered a valuable commodity, there is a lack of comprehensive data available. The existing data often comes from small samples, motivated research, or anecdotal evidence, making it difficult to create unique solutions for diverse and intersectional problems. Inadequate data undermines the ability to address various challenges and implement effective policies to bridge the digital divide.”

- Mr Vibodh Parthasarathi, Associate Professor, Centre for Culture Media & Governance, Jamia Millia Islamia





## PANEL 2: DIGITAL LITERACY AND SKILLS FACILITATING LEARNING AND GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Dr. KS Arul Selvan, Professor and Director, School of Journalism and New Media Studies (SOJNMS), IGNOU, as the moderator, started the second-panel discussion. Dr. Bidisha Banerji, Associate Professor & Dy. Director, Amity Institute of Public Policy, Amity University; Dr. Mansi Kedia, Senior Fellow at Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations; Dr. P Vigneswara Ilavarasan, Professor at Department of Management Studies at IIT Delhi; and Dr. Sharon Buteau, Executive Director, LEAD at University were part of the panel to discuss the second theme.

The prominent ideas shared during the discussion included:

- 1 The various characteristics associated with different social groups including but not limited to, gender, geographical location, age, and sector of employment determine the degree of digital access and usage.
- 2 Often, access to digital technologies takes place through intermediary bodies. This could be in the form of government intermediaries that aid the penetration of digital literacy programs, large private corporations that teach technical and employment-oriented digital skills, as well as Common Service Centres (CSC) that bridge the gap between government services and the individual.
- 3 Digital adoption is often undertaken through collective action that accelerates the number of people using any technology. This is exemplified by women's self-help groups or other women groups where the adoption of technology has a word-of-mouth effect, generating a level of trust which leads to widespread adoption across the communities.
- 4 Digital access also has a component of affordability, for devices as well as for services, such as data packs and call rates, which emphasises upon the need to have incentives to ensure sustained and organic use of technology. For example, women who have the skills to avail digital banking systems but don't have regular employment are unlikely to use digital payment facilities.



# BLURBS FROM THE SPEAKERS

“The steps of digital literacy are non-linear. It is much easier to teach someone how to watch videos on YouTube or send a message on WhatsApp, but to jump from there to opening a government website and filling in your details there or to shop on an e-commerce website and protect yourself from an UPI fraud.

—  
- Dr Mansi Kedia, Senior Fellow, Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations



“Theoretically, what is of interest to us, is the role of intermediaries. So, there is a program that is available and the government is supporting it, but there is an intermediary called the CSC (Common Service Centre). Similarly, Facebook conducts capacity building sessions for small scale business owners in smaller cities, on using their platforms better for their business. Whether we like it or not, in this country, the intermediaries have a very significant role to play in almost whatever we do in our lives here.

—  
- Dr P. Vigneswara Ilavarasan, Professor, Department of Management Studies, IIT Delhi

## PANEL 3: IMPACT OF THE DIGITAL ON EVERYDAY LIVES

As the moderator of the panel, Prof. Ellen Helsper commenced the discussion by speaking about the relationship between literacy and engagement with respect to technology and its effect on overall well-being. To discuss the impact of the digital landscape on everyday lives, especially with respect to mental well-being, she was joined by Dr. Damanjit Sandhu, Professor, Department of Psychology, Punjabi University, Patiala; Dr. Gauri Chakraborty, Professor at Times School of Media & Chairperson of Women Development Cell at Bennett University; Dr. Rachna Sharma, Associate Professor at the Indian Institute of Mass Communication; and Dr. Tarushikha Sarvesh, Assistant Professor of Sociology at Advanced Centre for Women's Studies at Aligarh Muslim University as panellists.

The principal arguments and knowledge shared were:

- 1** The imposition of digital in everyday life can cause mental fatigue, especially when the distinction between the professional and the personal, or work and entertainment, becomes blurred. However, women who used technology gained greater access to information on reproductive health in places where it is often inaccessible or considered taboo.
- 2** Any discussion about the digital ecosystem ought to include the well-being of children and an understanding of differences in vulnerability as they extensively use digital technology for educational purposes including entertainment. After the pandemic, it was observed that children who were forced onto digital platforms without any transition showed a lesser sense of shared spaces, reduced sense of responsibility towards the campus, and hampered decision-making skills after returning from it.
- 3** In research in Rajasthan, it was observed that men who used the internet were often more flexible with the rules of 'ghunghat' after seeing women on various digital platforms. It can also provide opportunities for shared sense of pride, for example, women feel a sense of empowerment and aspiration after watching other women's accomplishments that were earlier inaccessible to them.
- 4** It was also observed by the panellists that research on the impact of the digital on our everyday lives is still lacking in India and needs to be taken up for better evidence generation and policy outputs.

# BLURBS FROM THE SPEAKERS

“ Our research with young people revealed that those with higher technical skills discussed the relationship between literacy, technology engagement, and overall emotional problems (due to lack of peer networks, support groups and stable homes) were associated with a greater risk of negative outcomes from internet use.

”  
- Dr Ellen Helsper, Professor, London School of Economics and Political Science



“ While digital capital can empower underprivileged groups such as tribal and marginalised communities, it should be used cautiously to avoid intrusive measures and must be handled with sensitivity.

”  
- Dr Tarushikha Sarvesh, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Advanced Centre for Women's Studies, Aligarh Muslim University

“ In rural areas, individuals, including farmers, small girls, women, and children, use digital media despite lacking knowledge of accessing specific content. They rely on trending videos on platforms like YouTube, leading to immersive experiences.

”  
- Dr Rachna Sharma, Associate Professor, Digital Media, Indian Institute Of Mass Communication







# DAY 2



## PANEL 1: DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT AND SECURITY

The panellists for this session were Mr. Apar Gupta, Founder and Director at Internet Freedom Foundation; Captain Puneet Balasubramaniam, Director, Ministry of Defence, Government of India; Mr. Vineet Kumar, Founder & Global President, Cyberpeace Foundation; and Ms Meghna Bal, Head of Research & Fellow, Esya Centre. The panel was moderated by Mr. Arindam Banerjee, Co-founder and partner at PDAG. The panel delved into the necessity of expanding digital infrastructure in underserved regions, issues pertaining to cyber security and data protection.

The key ideas discussed during this session included:

- 1 | Maintaining data privacy and protection requires forming and implementing ethical guidelines for data collection, regular impact assessments by companies and institutions to manage risks, the inclusion of digital literacy in education, and transparency in government data usage.
- 2 | Growing digitisation along with lack of knowledge and experience in data sharing has generated widespread digital scams and online threats but the redressal mechanisms for such situations are often inefficient and time-consuming. The panel suggested updating the IT Act along with integration of digital security and cyber ethics in school curriculum to address the issue.
- 3 | Unrestricted use of measures such as internet shutdowns can detrimentally affect economic and social activities in the area, consequently harming other aspects of national interest as well.
- 4 | Various research findings indicate that connectivity in cities has plateaued, with fewer new individuals adopting internet or broadband connections. However, individuals having multiple modes of connectivity were not accounted for separately causing a higher number of total connections, hiding the variations on connectivity across different socio-economic groups.
- 5 | The need for regular updating of interventions and programs around capacity building due to the rapidly changing nature of digital ecosystems arising out of technological advancement, while improving access and dissemination, keeping in mind the context and characteristics of the target population.

# BLURBS FROM THE SPEAKERS

“ The data with respect to sales of smartphones show that the miracle which was called the Jio effect is not really lasting. It is concerning for us as a country which is looking at high degrees of tele-connectivity through mobile internet access as being a driver both of economic growth, social inclusion, as well as the delivery of government services.

”  
- Mr Apar Gupta, Founder Director, Internet Freedom Foundation



“ Over-reliance on technology as the panacea for all policy challenges and to see any emerging technology especially in terms of broadband connectivity as a game changer can sometimes be a paradox. Does one size fit all when we are looking at technological solutions?

”  
- Captain Puneet Balasubramanian, Director, Ministry of Defence, Government of India

“ While digitalisation is viewed as a panacea for resolving developmental problems, it often makes them harder. It is not so much a function of the deficit in the technology itself, it is a shortcoming in how it is deployed, or the missed opportunity to harness its potential correctly.

”  
- Ms Meghna Bal, Head of Research & Fellow, Esya Centre





## PANEL 2: DIGITAL FINANCIAL INCLUSION AND INNOVATION

Mr Sourav Adhikari, Consultant & Lead - Data Solutions, Policy and Development Advisory Group was joined by Ms Gayathri Shanmugam, Chief Programs Officer at Haqdarshak; Mr Rohit Kumar, founding partner at The Quantum Hub and Co-founder at the Young Leaders for Active Citizenship; and Mr Shobit Mathur, Director - Sales & Partnerships at Dhwani Rural Information Systems to discuss on the theme “Digital Financial Inclusion and Innovation”.

Key points discussed were:

1

For achieving widespread and comprehensive financial inclusion across the country, the panellists unanimously agreed that an assisted model of digitisation is necessary to encompass all communities and groups of people. The expertise and experience of resources engaged at the ground level possess important knowledge on the local economy which helps in building trust towards technology, as well as in simplifying complex paperwork and documentation, thereby improving access to digital services and government benefits.

2

Public sector banks have played a pivotal role in driving financial inclusion in rural areas. Consequently, simplifying the expansion process for these banks is crucial. To ensure a steady growth of public sector banks in rural areas, where the operational costs of establishing or running a bank branch are high, government bodies need to ensure that tightened regulations do not hinder the expansion of banks into remote areas. Increased access to banks can also enable people to become aware of their entitlements and make use of the dormant funds received from government schemes.

3

To achieve a robust integration of digital devices among people, it is essential to focus on both the design and user-friendliness of the application. Simplifying processes should ensure that both field level workers and recipients of various government schemes continue to utilise the technology, alongside receiving regular software updates to prevent obsolescence.

4

If individuals fall prey to scams and lose money, it can erode trust in technology within their community, thereby slowing the pace of digital integration. The panel emphasised upon the need to have better redressal mechanisms to counter such frauds.

# BLURBS FROM THE SPEAKERS

“ I can't think of a single government scheme where a citizen can apply for benefits by themselves. We have thousands of active schemes, but they are nowhere near as simplified as the onboarding or usage process of Paytm. This raises concerns about the access and understanding of the most marginalised individuals in the country.

— ”  
- Ms Gayathri Shanmugam, Chief Programme Officer, Haqdarshak



“ The challenge lies in including the large number of people who are yet to benefit from these schemes, as well as addressing the issue of dormancy among those already included.

— ”  
- Mr Rohit Kumar, Founding Partner, The Quantum Hub and co-founder, Young Leaders for Active Citizenship

“ Successes have been more prevalent in programs where the design is robust and follows an assisted model (e.g., Interactive Voice Response (IVR) system of communication) with a long-term approach, rather than a short-term, heavily target-driven approach.

— ”  
- Shobhit Mathur, Director - Sales and Partnerships, Dhvani Rural Information Systems



## PANEL 3: DIGITAL INCLUSION & STRATEGIES FOR MARGINALISED COMMUNITIES

The last session for day two was moderated by Dr Ellen Helsper and she was joined by Dr Sakshi Khurana, Senior Specialist (Skill Development, Labour, and Employment), NITI Aayog; Mr Liby Johnson, Executive Director at Gram Vikas; Dr Akashi Kaul, Assistant Vice President, Sambodhi Research & Communications Pvt. Ltd.; and Mr Arjun Venkatraman, Program Officer, Digital, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation India as panellists.

- 1 A significant portion of data collection in India comprises data from rural communities. Although these communities constitute the largest sources of data, the analysis of this data often fails to reach them. Therefore, data collection entities should ensure that their findings are shared with these sources. Additionally, simply digitising data or information sharing wouldn't guarantee inclusivity and the dissemination of information needs to incorporate alternative models that do not solely rely on digital devices.
- 2 Every technology operates within a specific context, and thus, the development of any technology must take into account the context of its users and its eventual adoption. Technology is not culturally neutral; currently, it mostly reflects western models of thought and language. Therefore, fostering inclusivity through local influencers or content creators becomes imperative to facilitate the contextualisation of such technology.
- 3 Since many digital technologies originate from Western cultures, there is a lexical gap for certain languages, where their English equivalents might not exist which may, in turn lead to inaccurate and incomplete translation in some cases. This is true for various regional languages in India spoken by a majority of the population who might not know the official and/or western languages. Thus, a fundamental shift is required on these platforms, focusing on conceptual foundations rather than mere translation.
- 4 Currently, new technologies and digital platforms often secure funding for the pilot phase of projects. However, funding tends to decrease significantly once the pilot is to transform into a scaled-up project. This phenomenon, which can be described as 'pilotitis,' poses significant challenges to the sustainability of existing technologies among the general population.

# BLURBS FROM THE SPEAKERS

“ There is a need for approaches that are tailored to the specific context...there is a need for a shift in the approach towards achieving this, from reaching the right audience to empowering individuals to be independent and make their own choices, particularly in the post-pandemic era.

”  
- Mr Arjun Venkataraman, Program Officer, Digital, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, India



“ Rural communities have valuable data but lack agency to translate it into meaningful results, particularly in programs like MGNREGS... Marginalised communities should be included as co-creators and co-owners, rather than mere users and data points. For example, the app Public, widely used even in rural India, is a model for inclusive digital platforms.

”  
- Mr Liby Johnson, Executive Director, Gram Vikas



“ 'Indigenisation of Technology' essentially means that it is a context-specific adoption and adaption of digital technologies. It means that you're not just responding to India as a country, but you're responding to a region such as Bhilwara, for instance, and what are the needs of the women in Bhilwara.

”  
- Dr Akashi Kaul, Assistant Vice President, Sambodhi Research & Communications Pvt. Ltd.



# WAY FORWARD

The DiSTO India initiative envisions a collaborative approach that brings together researchers, policymakers, organisations, and philanthropists to collectively address digital inequalities in the country. The initiative recognizes the multifaceted nature of the issue and aims to harness diverse perspectives and expertise to bridge the digital divide effectively.

We are hopeful that cross-sectoral collaboration will play a pivotal role in generating comprehensive insights and innovative solutions. By pooling resources, knowledge, and experiences, the initiative can tackle complex challenges posed by digital inequalities from various angles, ensuring a more holistic and impactful approach.

Furthermore, involving key individuals and organisations working in the field of digital inequalities will amplify the initiative's reach and effectiveness. By fostering partnerships and alliances, the initiative intends to leverage a wide range of perspectives to create a more equitable and inclusive digital ecosystem in India.

As the initiative progresses, its commitment to driving positive changes in India's digital landscape remains unwavering. The DiSTO India initiative looks forward to a future marked by collective endeavours, meaningful collaborations, and lasting impacts on the lives of individuals across the nation.



### READ MORE:

- <https://www.disto.pdag.in/>
- <https://www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/research/research-projects/disto>
- <https://www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/research/research-projects/disto/disto-india>

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