

Bridge the digital divide

BY DR N. BHASKARA RAO



Growing socio-economic inequalities that characterise India present us with a unique challenge while we formulate new information technology policies. Unless deliberate public efforts are made to reduce the divide between different regions and sections of people, the present emphasis on, and the hype about, IT has no special significance in the Indian context. There is much hope these days about IT being able to bridge the widening gulf in Indian society. IT definitely has the potential to offer the much needed breakthrough to achieve some kind of socio-economic parity and organisational efficiency. But for that to take place our public policies have to be such that they help channel these new technologies to fulfil the urgent needs of the disadvantaged and the faraway communities. Avoiding the so-called digital divide should not be as difficult as overcoming the disparities between the haves and the have-nots. "Digital opportunities," have that positive potential.

But unless certain things are ensured, the much needed empowerment of the people of Bharat will continue to be elusive. With the convergence of IT, broadcasting, and telecom,

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procedures and technologies are not attended to simultaneously, our progress will continue to be lopsided.

In this context the FM radio is a good example. Despite the fact that FM has been in India for well over a decade it hardly has any listener and is mostly limited to metro cities although it has programmes which are also targeted at the rural audience. This was because while we introduced FM transmitters we hardly ensured the availability of radio sets with a capacity to receive FM signals. We are now talking of going the FM-way in a very big manner.

So is the case of Direct to Home (DTH) television. Despite India experimenting with this as early as 1975-76, in 2400 villages spread across six states and five language pockets, and finding the feasibility of this technology to suit needs peculiar to India, we have waited for over two decades for a "commercial proposition" in this area. China on the other hand went ahead with this approach to connect nearly a million rural settlements. Unless we think of coming up with a cheaper version of new television sets or we upgrade the existing black and white sets to catch the new digi-

some kind of socio-economic parity and organisational efficiency. But for that to take place our public policies have to be such that they help channel these new technologies to fulfil the urgent needs of the disadvantaged and the faraway communities. Avoiding the so-called digital divide should not be as difficult as overcoming the disparities between the haves and the have-nots. "Digital opportunities," have that positive potential.

But unless certain things are ensured, the much needed empowerment of the people of Bharat will continue to be elusive. With the convergence of IT, broadcasting, and telecom, empowerment should no longer be a dream. If we fail to achieve this now, the country will remain at the bottom of the ladder, or somewhere down there, and will miss the opportunity once again in this decade. When will the rural-urban disparity in the availability, access and use of communication facilities be removed? The notion that distance has died is good. But what is more important here is that the disparities between India and Bharat should disappear.

This paradigm shift needed should not mean a mere shift from the state to the market. In India the over-riding objective of convergence should be a rapid expansion, extension and upgradation of telecom and information networks. So that larger sections of people have access to the networks and are also able to use them. Convergence of technologies should help India reduce the gap between demand and supply, tackle the information-imbalance and ensure equality of its people, both of India and Bharat.

To achieve this we should have proactive policies and perspective plans. First, empowering our people and catering to their needs should be our over-riding objective while devising policies for convergence; second, we must realise that compulsions for convergence are not merely exports. Of course,



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exports are important and essential for India to become a global leader. Third, the computer literacy movement that the country is witnessing should be extended beyond the regularised education system so that a larger section of society, beyond the schools, is covered. Fourth, it has to be made certain that language software is made freely available so that we do not limit IT to the English speaking population. Fifth, locally relevant and functionally meaningful softwares have to be developed in a decentralised manner. Sixth, rather than waiting for telephone or PC penetration, it has to be realised that television and cable television, already present in a large number of Indian households, have a greater potential of bridging the divide. Only when we are able to ensure all these criteria will we be able to leapfrog into the future.

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United States and China. Despite an emphasis on rural phones and connectivity, for over a decade now, this challenge continues to elude us, in spite of the fact that greater technology options are available to us. The 1994 National Telecom Policy, for example, could not achieve the aim of providing by 1997 at least one PCO in every village of the 600,000 villages targeted. NTP 1999 too stipulated a ten-fold increase in rural networks. But we hardly crossed the one per cent mark in that. The distortion in our priorities and practices is too obvious.

Of course, isolated examples of breakthroughs taking place in our villages are trickling in. But of such initiatives nothing is heard from states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Orissa. Ujjain district in Madhya Pradesh is expected to be the first district in the north where every village is expected to have an Internet connection before the end of

2001. By 2002, Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat plan to provide Internet connections to all villages and schools.

In a way this shows how a digital divide is already creeping in between the states in the south and those in the north. Unless the mindset of the government itself changes India as a whole cannot benefit from the convergence of communication technologies. A proliferation in the ministries and governmental agencies can only be counter-productive. What is needed is a convergence of government departments.

Benefits of convergence cannot be expected to flow fast enough to acquire a mass market and thereby viability, unless the hurdles in the process are removed and deliberate efforts are made towards that end by the government, by professionals, by R&D groups and by user end groups. User-end orientations, as well as protection are as important. If issues to do with the standardisation of these various convergence processes,

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- Reach of connectivity has to be beyond the present levels.
- Access should be made easier.
- Affordable cost.
- More, and appropriate, options and choices.
- Accountable to citizens or users.
- A level playing field. Entry should not be preventive.
- Enrichment of people and not merely entertainment.
- Knit people together, do not segment or divide.
- Check monopoly and centralisation of operations.
- Should be interactive, not one-sided.

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H.Y. SHARADA PRASAD is not well and his column will return as soon as he feels better

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