Short take

State govts, key levers in bridging digital divide

Swati Piramal
Rajasekhar Kalik

India's linguistic diversity also poses a huge challenge for digital inclusion. Mainstream digital solutions are often available in English and a few other languages, limiting access for non-English speakers.

The government, through its 'Digital India' drive, is making significant strides to improve telecom infrastructure, digital literacy, content in local languages, digital public infrastructure, and innovations in e-Governance.

The Digital Bharat Collaborative (a part of Piramal Foundation) health departments across States to help them envision and deploy digital technologies to enable equitable access to quality healthcare for all. Noteworthy is the Karuna Fellowship that is anchored on women-led development through empowerment of rural women via equipping them with digital skills.

Many Karuna Fellows are deployed in government departments, like the Command and Control Centre (CCC) at Patna run by the Health Ministry, Government of Bihar, and the 104 helplines in Guwahati and Patna, run by Assam and Bihar respectively.

One heart-warming example is that of Rani Kumari, Karuna Fellow, working at the CCC, Patna. Rani digitally monitors remote district hospitals in real-time and escalates any issues related to hospital conditions, and patient experiences to senior government health authorities, so that they are addressed quickly.

Frontline health workers like ASHAs are trained to use Apps to record health data, as part of creation of the ABHA ID. Such tech-based initiatives are going a long way towards digital inclusion.

A DIFFERENT APPROACH
To make digital a priority, state governments could set up a Program Management Unit that activates and strengthens internal structures focused on digital initiatives. States can also improve coordination amongst various departments that have a role in digital initiatives and with bodies like the state unit of National Informatics Centre.

Instead of localised and siloed efforts to launch apps and portals, a unified vision across all applications across departments can help. Using open-source software and Digital Public Goods like DIGIT e-Governance platform will help avoid vendor lock-ins and need for large funds to sustain digital initiatives. Regular audit of the health of digital infrastructure, State data centre, computers at district offices, and connectivity across all service facilities will ensure dependability. A greater thrust on building digital literacy in rural and remote geographies, will also go a long way in bridging the divide.

Swati Piramal is Vice-Chairperson, Piramal Group; and Kaliki, Director-Piramal Foundation

India has adopted digital technologies very rapidly thanks to the thrust given by the government, the partnerships with corporates and philanthropic organizations, and innovations by several start-ups. This has revolutionized almost all aspects of our lives – from how we access information and connect with people, to how we seek healthcare. The India Stack, consisting of Aadhar, Unified Payments Interface (UPI), and data standards, has revolutionized service delivery and facilitated financial inclusion up to the last mile.

The Challenges a Digital Divide Poses

Socio-economic disparity and geographical diversity are an intrinsic part of India, and this has led to a digital divide. The divide has hampered access to quality healthcare and education for millions, and hindered equal participation and opportunities, perpetuating existing inequity.

India's linguistic diversity also poses a huge challenge for digital inclusion. Mainstream digital solutions are often available in English and a few other languages, limiting access for non-English speakers.

With a diverse and large population of 1.5 billion, bringing the underserved communities within the ambit of online can unlock significant potential for development. The need of the hour, if India must become a developed nation by 2047, is to bridge the digital divide.

It is heartening to see that the government, through its 'Digital India' drive, is making significant strides to improve telecom infrastructure, digital literacy, content in local languages, digital public infrastructure, and innovations in e-Governance.

Digital Inclusion – the great enabler

The momentum has already picked up pace on Digital Inclusion with multisectoral collaborations supporting the government. Digital Bharat Collaborative (a part of Piramal Foundation) health departments across states to help them envision and deploy digital technologies to enable equitable access to quality healthcare for all. Noteworthy is the Karuna Fellowship that is anchored on women-led development through empowerment of rural women via equipping them with digital skills. Many Karuna Fellows are deployed in government departments, like the Command and Control Centre (CCC) at Patna run by the Health Ministry, Government of Bihar, and the 104 helplines in Guwahati and Patna, run by Assam and Bihar respectively.

One heart-warming example is that of Rani Kumari, Karuna Fellow, working at the CCC, Patna. Rani digitally monitors remote district hospitals in real-time and escalates any issues related to hospital conditions, and patient experiences to senior government health authorities, so that they are addressed quickly.

She hails from a small village, Chhapra, in Bihar and has acquired digital skills, built her self-confidence and ability to interact with stakeholders through the Karuna Fellowship. She is today a role model for people in her village.

Frontline health workers like ASHAs are trained to use Apps to record health data, as part of creation of the ABHA ID. Such tech-based initiatives are going a long way towards digital inclusion.

State Governments are best placed to move the needle on Digital India

Prioritising digital and adapting multi-pronged approaches is crucial for state governments, and they have the mandate to essay a vital role in ensuring digital inclusion of their people.

These governments are closer to local stakeholders like communities, civil societies, educational institutes, service providers etc., and are familiar with the unique needs and challenges. Thus, they are best placed to design targeted policies and programs for digital inclusion that address the unique characteristics of their state.

They have a deeper understanding of their local governance and administrative structures, which can expedite the implementation of digital initiatives and ensure smoother coordination among various state departments involved in the process. They can also explore public-private partnerships to leverage additional resources and expertise for digital inclusion efforts.

A Different Approach can make a Difference

To make digital a priority, state governments could set up a Program Management Unit that activates and strengthens internal structures focused on digital initiatives. States can also improve coordination amongst various departments that have a role in digital initiatives and with bodies like the state unit of National Informatics Centre.

Instead of localized and siloed efforts to launch apps and portals, a unified vision across all applications across departments can help achieve the true benefits of digital transformation. Using open-source software and Digital Public Goods like DIGIT e-Governance platform will help avoid vendor lock-ins and need for large funds to sustain digital initiatives.

Adopting e-Governance practices can significantly improve access, quality, and transparency of government services in areas like education, healthcare, agriculture, and local employment. When government services are easily accessible through easy-to-use digital portals and mobile applications, it encourages citizens, including the poor and those in remote areas, to learn and utilize them.

Strong governance practices like regular audit of the health of digital infrastructure, state data centre, computers at district offices, and connectivity across all service facilities will ensure dependability. A greater thrust on building digital literacy of local communities, especially in rural and remote geographies, will also go a long way in bridging the divide.

Digital and Development go hand in hand

Technology is a potent means to accelerate transformation, and it needs to be deployed with care so as not to deepen the divide. A developed India@100 is eminently possible with more partnerships, stronger collaborations and keeping people at the last mile at the centre of solutions. It is the creation and nurturing of mutually beneficial relationships between her people and new technology applications that will create pathways for a more inclusive and prosperous India – a developed India.