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'Swayam' to Revolutionise Digital Learning for Youth

World over, technology has come to play a vital role in stimulating the growing chorus for online education. It has come to represent a new generation of online education, freely accessible on the Internet and geared towards very large student numbers. After all, we have a generation of young ones who have grown up on technologies and are comfortable with learning through online platforms. India has not lagged behind.

The Union Government's launch of the Study Webs of Active – Learning for Young Aspiring Minds (Swayam) platform is the latest addition to the lexicon of technological education, and it can revolutionise learning in the country. The platform, which uses the services of Internet, Direct to Home (DTH) channels, tablets and mobiles to impart educational learning services to the remotest parts of the country, must be viewed as an effort on the part of the Union Government to extend the digital learning experience to one and all, especially the poor and the disadvantaged who live in unspoken about corners of the country and lack access to even basic education, let alone quality education.

Indeed, the digital mandate in this country, and also the world over, has been such that everyone seems to embracing it; or one may as well say that it has become all the more obligatory to adapt it. This is understandable as the process of India's transition into a developed economy necessitates this shift. This is why today the country is witnessing an unprecedented growth of Internet, information technology, data and broadband connectivity — digitisation is indeed the way forward. The true thrust to step up digital transition, however, must be on the ones who are impacted the most, the students.



To this end, several strides have been made. Digital India has been a promising opportunity to give a new lease of life to our education system and to fill the huge learning gap that the country faces. Thankfully, the e-learning sector has grown at a remarkable pace in the last few years. According a joint study by Google and KPMG, the size of India's e-learning market was \$247 million, comprising 1.6 million users in 2016. The market size is likely to grow eight-fold to \$1.96 billion and the user base will grow six times to 9.6 million users by 2021. In fact, India's e-learning market is the second-largest after the US, which is forecasted to exceed \$48 billion by 2020.

The concept for 'Swayam' though is not new. It is something similar to the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) programme in the US. Besides, there have also been many commercial online courses within the country that offer education, albeit at a heavy cost, catering to only a few sections of society. There's also no escaping from the fact of the huge digital divide that exists today.

While private educators and institutions were quick at adopting the digital way of life, there are still thousands of schools across the country that are yet to make the shift. Modern-day classrooms no longer replicate the traditional ones. Smart classrooms, digital boards, information and communication technology have all changed the way teachers teach and the way students learn. Textbooks have been replaced by computer tablets and mobile phones; chalk boards have been swapped by digital smart boards. But such opportunities are limited only to the urban and semi-urban areas. To this end, what is new about Swayam is the scale, scope and pace of the venture that will come at no big cost.

That inequalities in the Indian educational system — both in terms of quality and enrolment — exists is widely known. There have been several reports which point towards the rural-urban divide among literates and illiterates. As per a report by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), the literacy rate among persons of age seven years and above in India was 75 per cent. In



rural areas, the literacy rate was 71 per cent, as compared to 86 per cent in urban areas. Similarly, the Annual Status of Education Report has been constantly pointing out in its annual findings about the deficit in school education that leads to capacity deprivation; which in turn promotes gross inequalities of opportunity. Education has for long been the key to moving up the economic and social ladder, but the lack of opportunities has ensured that the full potential has remained untapped.

The merits of the launch of Swayam platform are many. First, an online platform will remove accessibility barriers. The streaming of online courses through DTH cable will eliminate the problem of access to physical educational infrastructure and teachers. It is a fact that not every village has a school. In many cases, students have to travel to another village to complete their education. Swayam can encourage children who are genuinely interested in academics to have access of education at homes and at schools. Second, the focus will strictly be on the quality of education. The courses have been prepared by teachers from some of the most reputed institutes across the country. Not all Government schools provide the quality of education that parents aspire their children to have. To this end, 'Swayam' will ensure that our students in the cities and at the village levels are taught the same things and with the same level of attention. The platform will also ensure that the overall cost of education comes down.

Third, a digital platform will eradicate infrastructural barriers. That most average schools in the country lack proper infrastructural facilities is well known. Most schools are in a depleted condition — there's no electricity, toilets are scarce, roofs leak, etc. True, infrastructure alone cannot help improve learning outcomes, but it definitely is a condition. Poor facilities have led to a poor pupil-teacher ratio and lack of motivation in the faculty as well. Fourth, a digital platform will promote flexibility. The channeling of online courses at regular intervals will help students plan better, especially those in rural regions, who want to study but their families want them to do menial jobs to add to the family income. This insistence or necessity to be a family



earner has generally prevented prospective students from attending school. A digital platform will allow students to both study and earn.

It must, however, be acknowledged that the path to this huge digital mandate will not be without difficulties. Satellite television broadcasting to terrestrial plains will be a complex process and the Government will require the support of regulators, broadcasting companies and network operators. A collective effort of all stakeholders will make the transition easier.

Nothing but education has the potential to lift people from poverty. Nothing but education has the scope to unlock billion brains to solve the country's problems. To this end, an online platform like Swayam has the potential to re-imagine and re-invigorate the education system in the country.

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