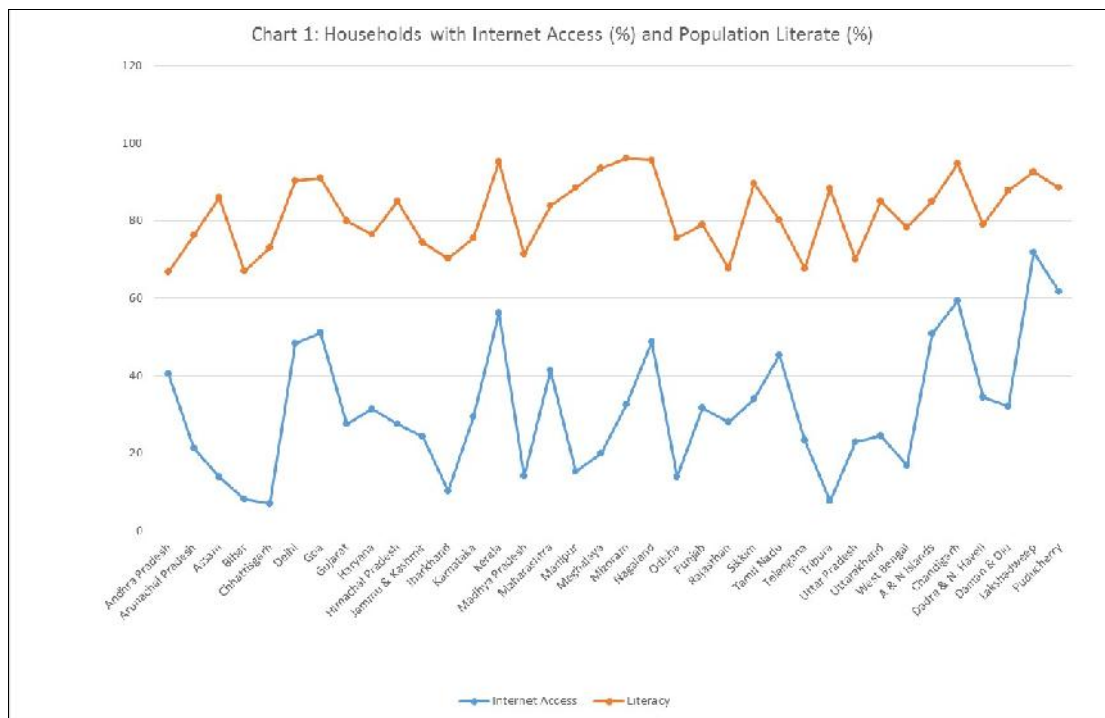


The Internet in “Digital India”*

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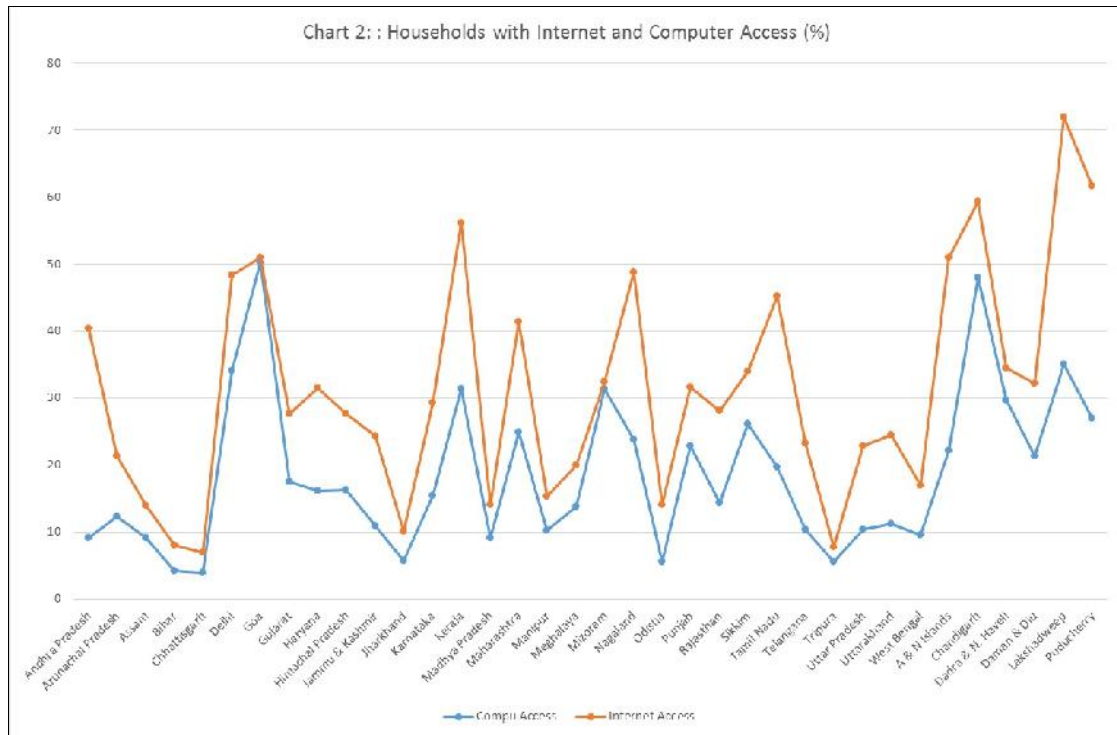
Among the initiatives launched with much fanfare by the NDA government is the one titled “[Digital India](#)”, which is slated to use high speed internet as a core utility and provide citizens entitlements, documents and a host of services on the cloud. While digital literacy is crucial for the success of such an initiative, a more fundamental requirement is access to and use of the Internet. How far does the government have to go to ensure access and use to be successful with this digital mission?

According to recently released survey results from India’s official [National Sample Survey](#) (NSS) Organization (71st Round with reference period January to June 2014), the proportion of Indian households in which at least one member had access to the Internet was 16.1 per cent in rural areas, 48.7 per cent in urban areas and 26.7 per cent in rural and urban areas combined. Needless to say, this is far short of the near universal connectivity envisaged by the Digital India mission.



If yet there is a unstated belief in certain circles that the foundations for a Digital India already exist, it is partly attributable to India’s success as an Information Technology (IT) and IT-enabled services provider to the rest of the world. It is also partly due to the kind of number observers look at. In absolute numbers India’s internet usage is impressive. According to a recently released [Boston Consulting Group report](#), at 190 million, India had the third largest population of internet users in the world in 2014, coming in after China (620 million) and the US (275 million). Besides that absolute number, the pace of expansion of the Internet user population is what is striking. A more optimistic set of estimates from the Internet and Mobile Association of India (and IMRB International) places the Internet user base at 300 million at the end of 2014. According to that set of estimates, a decade after the introduction of the internet the user base was estimated at 10 million. That figure rose

to 100 million a decade later. A further 100 million were added to the base in three years (2010 to 2013) and a year later the number of Internet users is estimated to have crossed 300 million in December 2014. While the reliability of such estimates is uncertain, and there can be differences in the numbers from different sources, the broad magnitudes are close. Thus, the oft-quoted website (www.internetworldstats.com) reports that the number of Internet users in India rose from around 5 million in 2000 to 243 million in June 2014, which makes the 300 million in December 2014 figure quite plausible.



However, before launching celebrations based on these absolute figures, a degree of caution is called for. These high and rising absolute figures conceal the fact that in relation to India’s population Internet penetration is still low. If we go by figures from Internet World Stats, Internet penetration within the population in India amounted to 19.7 per cent at the end of June 2014, as compared with 86.9 per cent in the U. S., 86.2 per cent in Japan, and 47.4 per cent in China.

The International Telecommunications Union (ITU) also estimates that around 18 per cent of individuals in India were using the Internet in 2014, as compared with 49.3 per cent in China, 90 per cent in Japan and 87.4 per cent in the US. But, as noted earlier, the NSS figures suggest that the proportion of **households** with Internet access is much higher than the “non-official” numbers on the proportion of **individuals** who are Internet users. Since services provided by the government are likely to be accessed by households, this improves the initial condition from which the government is working. But still, a quarter of households is a long way from the near universal access to cloud-based services that the government is hoping to ensure.

One problem is, of course, that of providing access to the hardware through which individuals get access to the Internet. Options here have increased hugely in recent years. But few seem to be willing to pay for access. Thus, the ITU estimates that only 3.1 per cent of Indian households had access to the Internet at home in 2011, whereas

that figure for China in 2012 was 23.7 per cent. Thus, Indian internet users would have to rely on connections of friends and acquaintances, or at the work place or in cyber cafes to access the internet.

Even here the government has made an effort. Almost a decade back it announced a policy initiative to bridge India's widening digital divide by increasing physical access to computers connected to the Internet. As part of that initiative it had promised to put in place in rural India a hundred thousand [Common Service Centres](#) (CSCs) – broadband-enabled computer kiosks that will offer a range of government-to-citizen and business-to-customer services, besides providing sheer access to the Internet. The CSCs were expected to begin servicing all of India's 600, 000 villages by mid-2008. However successful the government has been, it does not seem to have helped universalise access.

The challenge here seems enormous. The NSS survey quoted earlier suggests that there is an unusual relationship between internet access, computer access and literacy. As is to be expected the extent of literacy across the states of India is higher than the extent of access to the Internet through at least a single member of the household. That suggests there is still some slack in terms of getting literate people to take to the Internet. However, there is a strong association between household access to computers (or proportion of households with access) and household access to the Internet. While one survey may be inadequate to arrive at any causal suggestions let alone conclusions, if this relationship proves robust it could imply that increasing internet access is predicated on increasing hardware access to a far greater degree than the CSC programme envisaged. That makes the Digital India challenge not just more difficult, but more expensive.

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