

# India's 'digital divide' worst among peers: study

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Indian artists from Rajasthan are seen using a computer at a crafts fair in New Delhi. India is trailing its so-called BRIC colleagues Brazil, Russia and China in bridging the "digital divide" as a large number of its population has no Internet access, a report said Wednesday.

Most Indians are missing out on the "digital revolution" due to dismal Internet access for the poor with the nation lagging far behind its emerging market peers, a study found Wednesday.

The study said India was at "extreme risk" from a lack of "digital inclusion" as a vast proportion of its 1.2 billion population had no access to the Internet.

"Digital inclusion has the potential to bring education to people in countries where educational infrastructure is limited and the

development of cadres of teachers is still constrained," said Alyson Warhurst, head of British risk analysis firm MapleCroft, which carried out the survey.

Digital inclusion is also crucial in helping people take part in economic activities and improves democratic governance, Warhurst added.

A Digital Inclusion Index compiled by MapleCroft found that of 186 countries India was in the lowest category, well behind Russia, China and Brazil in the BRIC grouping of emerging economies.

India is one of the world's fastest growing economies and is expected to clock nine percent expansion in the coming financial year starting April 1.

However, on a scale of one to 186 with one the worst, India stood at 39, in the same "extreme risk" category as Niger, ranked number one, Chad and Ethiopia.

Russia stood at 134, Brazil at 110 and China at 103, all of which are classified as being at "medium risk".

The Netherlands came top of the index at 186, with Sweden at 183 and Britain at 182.

The United States was ranked 169, still categorised as low-risk, but the study noted Hispanic and African American families suffered from "significant digital exclusion."

The study used 10 indicators, including mobile and broadband subscriptions, to identify countries whose populations were being held back by a lack of "digital inclusion."

India is the world's fastest-growing mobile market with some 771 million mobile subscribers and monthly additions averaging around 19 million.

But the survey found it was just the wealthier segment of India's population, mainly in urban areas, who use modern communications technology.

The biggest impediments to wider use of the Internet in India were expense, lack of education, and poor connectivity, the study found.

However, India is rolling out third-generation (3G) phone services which is expected to be a major boost to rural Internet usage.

China has the largest number of Internet users in the world with 420 million, accounting for over half Asia's Internet users.

But Maplecroft said Internet freedom in China remained a problem.

"Despite the Chinese government's efforts to expand Internet connectivity across the nation having seen how it can aid economic growth, the Internet remains heavily controlled," the study said.

The Internet and mobile phones played a key role in coordinating recent uprisings in Tunisia, ranked 81 on the index, and Egypt, ranked 66, while in Libya, in 77th position, unrest has resulted in civil war, the study noted.

"Growth in middle class population size and increasing levels of computer literacy have intertwined with the frustration and disenchantment caused by widespread youth unemployment and restrictions placed on democratic freedoms," said Maplecroft's Warhurst.

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