

India hungry for everyday Internet access

August 14 2011, by Ammu Kannampilly

India has built a global reputation as a major player in information technology, but lack of Internet access among its own citizens is posing a threat to long-term growth.

One typical young Indian frustrated by the country's poor Internet facilities is Srishti Sharma, 18, a student at the elite Lady Shri Ram college in the capital New Delhi.

"There are times when you desperately need to do some research using the net, and the only place you can go to is the library which is packed since there are only about ten computers there," she said.

Instead Sharma lugs her laptop out of the college grounds to Internet cafes and pays for access to a wi-fi connection.

"Almost every day I have to leave campus to do my work. It's really irritating, you end up wasting so much time going back and forth," the political science student said.

In many ways, Sharma is among the lucky ones as India's 1.2 billion people scramble to reap the benefits of the country's economic transformation.

Only three percent of all Indians living in rural areas will be active [Internet users](#) by the end of this year, according to forecasts by the Internet and Mobile Association of [India](#) (IAMAI).

The low figure comes despite an expected doubling in the number of rural users, from 12.1 million in December 2010 to 24 million in December 2011.

Technology giant Cisco released data in June showing that global Internet usage will quadruple between 2010 and 2015, but that India will still trail behind [emerging market](#) rivals such as China, South Africa and Mexico in terms of per capita usage.

"The government needs to make Internet access a priority," San Francisco-based technology consultant Ulrik McKnight, who works with firms in India, Europe and the US, told AFP.

"Imagine the impact it could have on education. It's much cheaper to post course material online and give aspiring students a net connection than build colleges in every village."

He said that previous governments had faced opposition when they tried to bring new technology to India, with many saying that the authorities needed to focus on providing access to food and water, not phones and computers.

"The argument that basic needs trump other needs has been made again and again in India, against the introduction of colour television, personal computers and payphone booths," McKnight said.

Unlike the mobile phone, which spread quickly among all Indians from urban executives to farm workers, the Internet has taken longer to catch on, IMAI president Subho Ray said.

"The mobile phone was bound to succeed in India, it fulfilled a purpose since people found it difficult to get landlines set up," he said.

"But the Internet is more complex. You have to help people understand what it can do for them, they don't automatically get it."

Analysts say India's absence of infrastructure -- from steady electricity to an extensive landline network -- has been a big stumbling block to broadening Internet access.

India's left-leaning Congress government derives much of its support from the poor, and for years its priorities have reflected the concerns of its voter base, with a focus on rural welfare programmes over technological development.

"I am not sure the government is doing anything to promote Internet access, particularly in rural India," influential technology blogger Amit Agarwal told AFP.

"Even in villages, kids will pick up the skills fast, but someone needs to provide them with basic infrastructure to make it happen."

A much-vaunted plan to create 20 million broadband connections by 2010 fell far short of its target, despite the government pegging broadband speed at a measly 256 kilobytes per second, 1/16th of the US standard of 4.0 megabytes per second.

India has ambitious plans to raise the number of broadband connections from about 12 million today to 75 million by 2012 and 160 million by 2014.

Telecom firms have also started rolling out wireless broadband networks since last year after winning third-generation (3G) and wireless broadband spectrum in government auctions.

There were hopes that 3G [mobile phone](#) services, which include Internet

access, would boost usage but the service is still too expensive for most Indians, with companies charging between 700 (\$15) and 1000 rupees a month.

Ray, the IAMAI president, said that despite India being home to software giants like Infosys and Tata Consultancy Services, the country stood to "lose its competitive edge" unless the Internet becomes part of everyday life for millions more Indians.

"If India wants to reach a stage where its companies are filing patents regularly, then it needs to step up its efforts," he said.

"It needs a technological revolution."

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