

Digital Education- A Hope in Pursuit of Sustainable Development Goal 4- Quality Education for All

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ABSTRACT

Manifold linkages exist between education and the development of any country. Although the global community realizes the need for quality education to ensure that development is sustainable, in India, providing education to each learner is a challenge; thus, sustainable development is at stake. Considering the fact and challenges present in India, an attempt is being made in this paper to assess the potential of Digital Education as means of education dissemination to the last learners of the country. To establish Digital Education as a way forward, the paper discusses and assesses the favorable factors available in India which can contribute to making Digital Education a Success in India. Along with the favorable factors, the paper also discusses the challenges, which essentially need to be dealt with beforehand.

Key Words : Digital Education, Sustainable Development Goal-4, Higher Education, Quality Education

“Education is a human right with immense power to transform. On its foundation rest the cornerstones of freedom, democracy, and sustainable human development.”

Kofi Annan
(Former United Nations Secretary-General)

INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental right of every individual and has a vital role to play in any country's socio-economic development. The international community recognizes the importance of equity in quality education for all. Despite much progress, the world community failed to accomplish the Millennium Development Goal of achieving universal education by 2015. In continuation of all efforts to ensure education for every individual, the international community adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in September 2015, which are set to be accomplished by 2030. The fourth SDG is dedicated to ensuring quality education as it affirms to ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning

opportunities for all’ (UNEP, 2022). The inclusion of education in SDGs reaffirms that education is one of the most powerful and proven vehicles for sustainable development.

In a developing country like India which is large and diverse to its geographic extension and socio-economic heterogeneity, various issues are responsible for its steady growth, and one of the major factors is its large population. It is an irony that education plays a vital role in the country to bridge the socio-economic gap among the population, and at the same time, it becomes very difficult to provide quality education to the last learner considering the diversity. A Good quality education system is essential for discoveries, new knowledge, innovation, and entrepreneurship for the huge Indian population that triggers growth and prosperity of the individual as well as that of the country (AISHE, 2021). As per a report published by the World Bank, the Higher Education System in India ranks third in the world after the United States and China. The Higher Education sector in India has witnessed remarkable growth since independence. However, the Gross enrollment in higher education

remains low at 27.1 per cent in comparison to other countries and global GER of around 37 per cent. It is very relevant to mention here that it is almost 8 years since SGD was adopted, and India has progressed from 24.5% GER to 27.1% GER in Higher Education (AISHE, 2021). Given the mentioned progress in GER, the set target (50% by 2030) in NEP 2020 seems unrealistic. The only hope with Digital Education is to help in increasing GER and achieve SDG 4.

In this context, in this paper, an attempt is being made to explore the prospects of Digital Education in achieving the target in respect of SDG-4.

Sustainable Development Goal-4 and Digital Education:

Sustainable Development Goal-4 aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Though SDG 4 talks about the overall Education system, here we would be concentrating on Higher Education only to get the precise discussion and results.

The Government of India has taken several initiatives to achieve SDG 4 and promote inclusive and equitable quality education. Some of the key initiatives in the Higher Education sector are mentioned below-

- (a) *Digital India*: The Digital India program aims to transform India into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy. This initiative includes several programs that focus on providing digital infrastructure, promoting digital literacy, and creating digital content to enhance the quality of education.
- (b) *National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning (NPTEL)*: NPTEL is an online learning initiative launched by the Government of India in partnership with the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and the Indian Institute of Science (IISc). The initiative provides online courses in engineering, science, and humanities to students and working professionals across the country.
- (c) *National Skills Development Corporation (NSDC)*: The NSDC is a public-private partnership initiative that aims to promote skill development and vocational training in India. The initiative provides training and employment opportunities to youth, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

- (d) *SWAYAM*: SWAYAM is a digital platform launched by the Ministry of Education that provides free online courses to students and working professionals across the country. The platform offers courses from top Indian universities and institutions and covers a wide range of subjects and disciplines.

These initiatives by the Government of India demonstrate its commitment to achieving SDG 4 and related to Digital Education, which is promoting inclusive and equitable quality education. By improving access to education, enhancing the quality of education, and promoting lifelong learning opportunities, these initiatives are contributing to building a more equitable and prosperous society.

Digital education has the potential to contribute significantly to achieving this goal. Here are some prospects for digital education in the context of SDG 4, in the particular case of India:

1. **Accessibility**: Digital education can help overcome geographical barriers and provide access to education for students in remote and underprivileged areas. It can also provide flexible learning opportunities for those who cannot attend traditional classroom-based courses due to work or other commitments.
2. **Affordability**: Digital education can be more affordable than traditional classroom-based education, making it accessible to a broader section of the population. This can help to bridge the education gap and provide opportunities for individuals who might not have had access to education otherwise.
3. **Quality**: Digital education can provide high-quality education through innovative pedagogy and the use of technology-based tools. It can also provide personalized learning experiences and adaptive assessments, which can help students to learn at their own pace and level.
4. **Lifelong Learning**: Digital education can provide opportunities for lifelong learning, enabling individuals to up-skill and reskill throughout their careers. This can help individuals to adapt to changing job market demands and contribute to their personal and professional growth.
5. **Innovation**: Digital education is an area of innovation, and it can provide opportunities for the development of new teaching and learning

methods, tools, and technologies. This can drive innovation in education and contribute to the development of new and improved educational models.

Digital education has significant prospects for achieving SDG 4. With the increasing availability of technology and the internet, digital education is likely to become an integral part of the education system and provide opportunities for inclusive and equitable quality education in India.

Digital Education in India:

Digital education has become a significant trend in education globally, with many countries adopting technology-based learning methods. Here is a comparison of digital education in India with the other countries on the following parameters:

1. *Penetration of Technology:* India is home to the world's second-largest internet user base, but access to the internet and technology in remote and rural areas is limited. In comparison, many developed countries have a higher penetration of technology, with high-speed internet available in most regions.
2. *Digital Infrastructure:* Developed countries have well-established digital infrastructure, with robust internet connectivity and widespread availability of digital devices. In contrast, India is still in the process of developing its digital infrastructure, with many regions lacking adequate digital connectivity and devices.
3. *Adoption of Online Learning:* While online learning has been growing in India, it still accounts for a small percentage of overall education. In developed countries, online learning is more widely adopted and accounts for a significant percentage of education.
4. *Quality of Digital Education:* The quality of digital education in India varies significantly, with some institutions providing high-quality online courses while others are still in the process of developing their digital learning capabilities. In developed countries, the quality of digital education is generally higher, with established institutions providing a range of high-quality online courses.
5. *Government Support:* The Indian government has launched several initiatives to promote digital

education, including the SWAYAM platform. Developed countries also have similar initiatives, but they generally have more resources and funding to support their efforts.

While India has made significant progress in digital education in recent years, it still lags behind many developed countries in terms of digital infrastructure, adoption of online learning, and the quality of digital education. However, with the government's focus on promoting digital education and the increasing availability of technology and the Internet, the gap between digital education in India and other parts of the world is likely to narrow in the coming years.

Largest Youth Population:

The largest youth population is another factor that contributes to increasing the scope of Digital Education. According to the United Nations, the youth population is defined as individuals between the ages of 15 and 24 years old. In India, it was estimated to be around 356 million in 2020, and as per United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), India will continue to have one of the youngest populations in the world till 2030. India is experiencing a demographic window of opportunity, a "youth bulge" that will last till 2025 (UNFPA, 2023). This represents about 27% of India's total population. (*Estimates and projections of the economically active population: 1990-2020*, International Labor Organization (2011)). Here are some major characteristics of the youth populations of India

1. India has the largest youth population in the world, with nearly 28% of its population aged between 10-24 years.
2. According to the latest census conducted in 2011, the youth literacy rate in India is 86.1%. However, there are still significant disparities in access to education between different regions and social groups.
3. The percentage of youth enrolled in higher education in India is around 26%, which is relatively low compared to other countries.
4. Youth unemployment is a major challenge in India, with an estimated 20% of youth aged between 15-29 years unemployed in 2020.
5. Youth make up a significant portion of India's workforce, with around 34% of the country's total workforce aged between 15-29 years.

India's large youth population presents huge

opportunities as the young population could be a source of demographic dividend if they are properly educated, trained, and employed. This demographic group represents a major economic and social force in the country and has the potential to drive India's growth and development in the coming years.

In this regard, it is very significant to ensure quality education and livelihood for students through vocational and skill development courses combined with traditional education systems. With the advent of technology, online learning has become a popular mode of education in India. Many government and private organizations are providing online courses and resources to help youth learn new skills and advance their education. While progress has been made in recent years, there is still much to be done to ensure that all youth have access to quality education and opportunities to succeed.

Penetration of Smartphones and the Internet:

Generally, young populations are usually more tech-savvy and ready to adapt to technological advancements. Considering internet access and usage in India, a tremendous increase can be seen over the years. In addition, users of smartphones in India reached around 400 million in 2018; and according to a survey conducted by the Times Of India group, with increased usage of smartphones, consumption of internet data also increased as around 500 million people were using internet mobile data in June 2018. Here it is also important to note that most of the users of internet data are young population school and college students (Fig. 3).

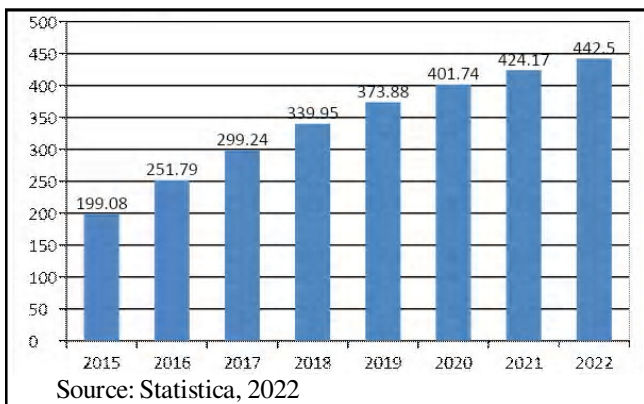


Fig. 1 : Smart Phone Users in India

In 2020, 53 per cent of India's total population accessed the internet from their mobile phones. This was expected to grow to 96 per cent by 2040, indicating a

significant rise in the country's mobile internet user base (Statistica, 2022).

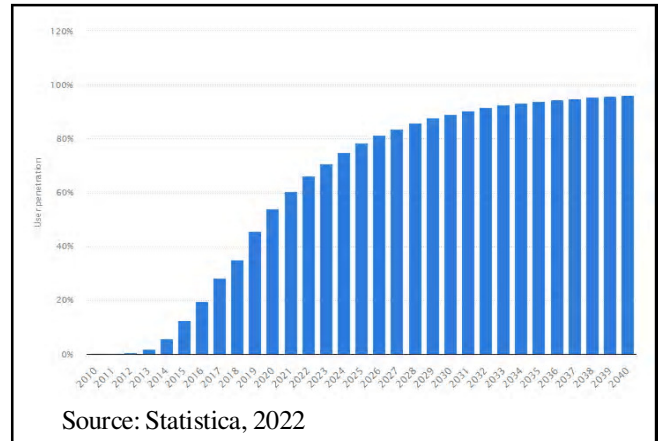


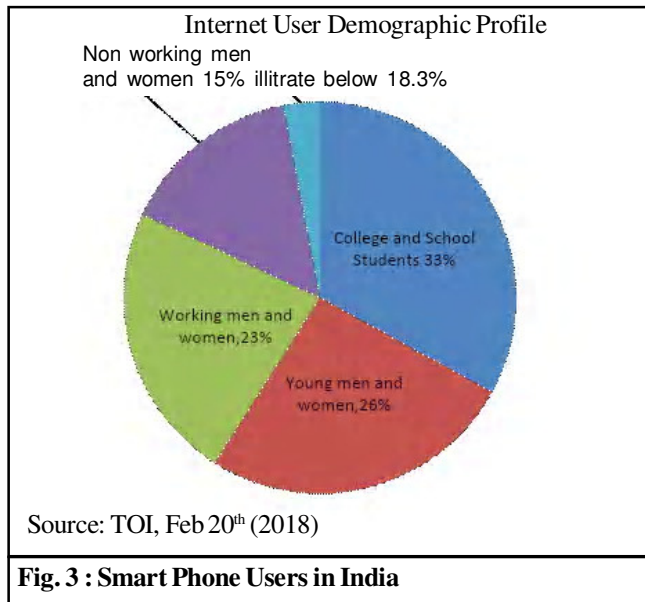
Fig. 2 : Smart Phone Users in India

The Fig. 2 depicts that India has one of the largest numbers of smartphone users in the world. According to a report by Statistica, the number of smartphone users in India is projected to reach around 443 million by 2022, up from approximately 300 million in 2017. This growth is driven by several factors, including the increasing availability of affordable smartphones, the expansion of mobile internet networks, and the adoption of digital services and applications.

Smartphones have become an integral part of daily life for millions of Indians, providing access to a range of services, including communication, entertainment, education, e-commerce, and digital payments. In addition, smartphones have enabled greater access to information and services in rural areas, where access to traditional infrastructure, such as banks and hospitals, is limited.

In terms of Internet Penetration, it has been growing rapidly in recent years in India, thanks to falling Internet prices, increased availability of affordable smartphones, and government initiatives such as the Digital India program. According to the latest statistics, as of 2022, the internet penetration rate in India is around 50%, which means that approximately 700 million people have access to the Internet (ET, 2023).

Considering the penetration of the internet and smartphone in the Indian population indicates clearly that the population is ready to adjust to digital services of any kind in making the overall process of functioning smooth, transparent, and effective. Every aspect of their lives is influenced by technology. Being surrounded by digital



technologies, they expect similar dynamics in the educational domain as well; understanding traditional forms of learning becomes a problem for them, as technology makes the search for information quick, more specific, and keyword oriented. In the field of education, too, many digital initiatives have been brought in, diminishing physical and geographical limitations and barriers to accessing quality education.

The growth of internet penetration in India has been driven by a few key factors. First, the government has invested in digital infrastructure, such as high-speed internet connectivity and e-governance services, to promote digitalization and improve access to the internet. Second, the rise of affordable smartphones and mobile data plans has made it easier for people to access the internet on the go. The availability of low-cost smartphones has made internet access more accessible, especially for people living in rural areas. Third, the growth of e-commerce and online services has also contributed to the growth of internet penetration in India. Online shopping, digital payments, and online entertainment have become increasingly popular among Indian consumers, driving up demand for internet connectivity.

Huge demand for Online Courses:

Given the penetration of smartphones and the internet in India, the demand for online courses is increasing continuously. The Online Learning Platform segment encompasses any third-party platform offering paid courses, including platform-sponsored certificates

and badges, language learning apps, boot-camp platforms, and online tutoring platforms. This segment follows user and revenue development for individuals/parties who make a one-time payment for packaged content or who purchase a subscription providing access to the course material (Statistica, 2023).

The demand for online courses in India has been growing rapidly in recent years. With the widespread availability of the internet and the increasing adoption of digital technologies, more and more people in India are turning to online courses to acquire new skills, enhance their knowledge, and improve their career prospects.

Moreover, online courses offer a wide range of subjects and disciplines, from traditional academic subjects to vocational and professional courses, which are not always available in traditional brick-and-mortar institutions.

Another factor contributing to the demand for online courses in India is the relatively lower cost compared to traditional education. Online courses are often more affordable, making them accessible to a larger section of the population. In summary, the huge demand for online courses in India can be attributed to their convenience, flexibility, affordability, and availability of a wide range of subjects and courses. Online Education is projected to be economically beneficial too. A few observations are pointed out in the research done by Statistica 2023. *i.e.*

- Revenue in the Online Learning Platforms is projected to reach US\$4.73bn in 2023.
- Revenue is expected to show an annual growth rate (CAGR 2023-2027) of 11.39%, resulting in a projected market volume of US\$7.28bn by 2027.
- In the Online Learning Platforms, the number of users is expected to amount to 244.0m users by 2027.
- User penetration will be 10.3% in 2023 and is expected to hit 16.6% by 2027.
- The average revenue per user (ARPU) is expected to amount to US\$32.31.
- In global comparison, most revenue will be generated in China (US\$41.73bn in 2023).
- With a projected rate of 22.1%, the user penetration in Online Learning Platforms is highest in China.

MOOCs - (Massive Open Online Courses):

MOOCs provide access to quality education to a

vast number of students across the country and are becoming very popular in India. There are some key factors contributing to increasing MOOCs' popularity in the country-

1. *Platforms*: There are several MOOC platforms available in India, including Coursera, edX, Udemy, and SWAYAM. These platforms offer courses in various disciplines, ranging from computer science and engineering to humanities and social sciences.
2. *Access*: MOOCs provide access to quality education to students from all backgrounds and locations. The courses are available online, and students can learn at their own pace and convenience.
3. *Affordability*: MOOCs are generally more affordable than traditional classroom-based courses. Some MOOCs are free, while others may require a fee. However, the fee is generally much lower than that of a traditional course.
4. *Personalization*: Digital education allows for personalized learning, where students can learn at their own pace and in their preferred style.
5. *Skill Development*: Digital education can help to bridge the gap between industry requirements and the skills of the workforce by providing training in new and emerging technologies.
6. *Equity*: Digital education can help to bridge the gap between urban and rural areas by providing access to the same quality of education for all.
7. *Interactive*: Digital education provides an interactive learning experience that can engage students and enhance their learning. Digital education tools such as online quizzes, interactive simulations, and virtual reality experiences can help students retain information and better understand complex concepts.
8. *Up-to-date*: Digital education provides up-to-date information on the latest developments in various fields. This is especially important in rapidly changing fields such as technology and healthcare.
9. *Environmentally Friendly*: Digital education is more environmentally friendly than traditional classroom-based learning. It eliminates the need

for paper-based textbooks, reduces transportation emissions, and saves on energy costs.

10. *Certification*: MOOCs provide certification upon completion of the course, which can help students to enhance their resumes and improve their employability.
11. *Government Support*: The Government of India has launched the SWAYAM platform, which provides MOOCs in various disciplines. The platform is designed to offer quality education to students across the country.

Given the above, MOOCs have significant potential in India to provide access to quality education to a vast number of students. The popularity of MOOCs in India is likely to continue to grow in the coming years, and they will play a crucial role in the country's education sector. Despite having many benefits and advantages of online education, it has several drawbacks and challenges too.

Challenges :

Digital learning is more than just providing students with a laptop. Online learning requires a combination of technology, digital content, instruction, etc., and all these aspects come with certain challenges in itself. Certain conditions have to be kept in mind. Thirdly, even online updation of educational programs during short intervals can pose a challenge. Therefore, feedback must be given utmost importance so that courses that are not that popular can be flushed out and new and creative ones can be introduced in their place. This will also help in ensuring that the online drop-out rate is low, which for MOOCs can be the biggest obstacle in the long run. Also, the course material should be revised over time to ensure simplicity and ease of understanding. Fourthly, MOOCs, instead of being a separate learning experience, should focus on integrating with classroom-style teaching so that there is a level of uniformity in the overall course structure and better course design to cater to the market demands. This process can also help in the revision of MOOC programs effectively. Another key aspect to be kept in mind is that merely providing the best of the best materials is not enough. What is also important is how it is being presented. The uses of video lectures followed by practical exercises and case studies, as well as virtual learning tours with continuous feedback, are some of the effective ways to make MOOCs a success.

- a. Technology:** Technology is the mechanism that delivers content. It facilitates how students receive content. It includes Internet access and hardware, which can be any Internet access device – from a desktop to a laptop to an iPad to a smartphone. Technology is the tool, not the instruction. One of the biggest challenges of digital education is the lack of access to technology and reliable internet connectivity, particularly in rural and low-income areas. Without access to the necessary infrastructure, students may not be able to participate in online classes or access digital learning resources. There is a significant digital divide in the country, with many Indians still lacking access to basic digital infrastructure, including mobile networks and smartphones. Furthermore, the rapid growth of the smartphone market has raised concerns about data privacy and security, with incidents of data breaches and cyber-attacks on the rise.
- b. Diversity of the Learners:** India is a very diverse country that is rich in culture. Therefore, implementing different international MOOC programs can pose a challenge in terms of cultural translation, which has to be kept in mind. This would require critical exploration of different specialized subjects.
- c. Pedagogy:** It offers far greater flexibility in terms of knowledge, but how that knowledge can be integrated with classroom-based learning is a pivotal question that requires further introspection. Also, having a vast array of choices can contribute to chaos. Therefore, the program should focus on simple and easy-to-implement educational courses initially.
- d. Instruction:** Educators are essential to digital learning. Technology may change the role of the teacher, but it will never eliminate the need for a teacher. With digital learning, teachers will be able to provide personalized guidance and assistance to ensure students learn and stay on track – throughout the year and year after year – to graduate from high school. Teachers may be the guide on the side, not the sage on the stage. The above growth in the number of colleges is partly matched by the growing number of disciplines or vocations in which these programs are offered by colleges (read Bio-informatics, journalism, hospitality, tourism, banking, insurance, retail trade, etc.). This is partly due to the tremendous growth in the service industry.
- e. Quality of Digital Content:** Digital content is academic material that is delivered through technology. It is what students learn. It ranges from new engaging, interactive, and adaptive software to classic literature to video lectures to games. It isn't simply a PDF of text or a PowerPoint presentation. The quality of digital content and online courses can vary significantly, and not all content may be reliable or accurate. Students may also struggle with understanding the material without the guidance of a teacher. There is also a need to develop digital content in local languages to ensure that internet access is more inclusive and accessible to all.
- f. Quality Assurance:** Quality assurance is a crucial aspect of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) to ensure that the courses meet the standards of traditional classroom-based courses. Here are some key points about quality assurance in MOOCs:
- g. Course Design:** The course design should be structured and coherent, with clear learning objectives and assessment methods. The course content should be engaging, interactive, and relevant to the learning outcomes.
- h. Pedagogy:** The pedagogy should be learner-centric, with a focus on active learning and student engagement. The course should be designed to cater to different learning styles and abilities.
- i. Instructor Quality:** The instructors should be qualified and experienced in their respective fields. They should have excellent communication skills and should be able to provide timely feedback to students.
- j. Course Delivery:** MOOCs should be delivered using a reliable platform that is accessible to all students. The platform should have features that allow students to track their progress and interact with instructors and peers.
- k. Assessment and Certification:** The assessment methods should be reliable, valid, and aligned with the learning outcomes. The assessment should provide meaningful feedback

to students, and the grading should be transparent. Certification should be provided upon successful completion of the course.

l. Support Services: MOOCs should provide adequate support services to students, such as technical support, academic advising, and counseling services.

m. Assessment and Certification: MOOCs should have a rigorous assessment process to ensure that students have achieved the learning outcomes.

n. Continuous Improvement: MOOCs should be regularly evaluated and updated to ensure that they remain relevant and effective. Feedback from students should be taken into consideration, and the course should be modified accordingly.

Overall, quality assurance is critical to ensure that MOOCs meet the standards of traditional classroom-based courses. With proper quality assurance measures in place, MOOCs can provide quality education to a vast number of students across the globe.

Conclusion:

For India, Digital Education carries a huge potential for building inequality and gaps in the Higher Education Sector; and the concept was adopted and started with the same vision. Considering socio-economic factors in India, the success of the concept will depend on a few aspects of MOOC, such as quality, affordability, scalability, inclusion, and employability. Now, the education system in India is moving towards digital education, which enables the democratization of education. Digital education provides education for all, irrespective of their geographic location and socio-economic background. In India, Digital Education has a very significant role to play concerning the already set target for GER in NEP 2020 and SDG. Below mentioned are some factors which establish the relevance /importance of Digital Education in India.

Digital education can play a crucial role in promoting sustainable development in India. Here are some ways in which digital education can contribute to sustainable development:

1. **Access to education:** Digital education can help overcome physical and geographical barriers to education, providing access to quality education to students in remote areas. This can help reduce the education gap and promote equal opportunities for all, which is essential for

sustainable development.

2. **Affordable education:** Digital education can be more affordable than traditional education, making it accessible to more people, especially those from lower-income backgrounds. This can help reduce the cost of education and make it more inclusive, contributing to sustainable development.
3. **Environmental sustainability:** Digital education can help reduce the environmental impact of education by reducing the need for physical infrastructure such as buildings and textbooks. This can help conserve natural resources and reduce carbon emissions, promoting environmental sustainability.
4. **Skill development:** Digital education can provide opportunities for skill development and vocational training, enabling individuals to acquire skills that are in demand in the job market. This can help promote economic sustainability by reducing unemployment and contributing to the growth of industries.
5. **Innovation:** Digital education can foster innovation and creativity by providing a platform for collaborative learning and sharing of ideas. This can help promote sustainable development by encouraging the development of new technologies, products, and services that are socially and environmentally responsible.

In conclusion, digital education can play a significant role in promoting sustainable development in India by providing access to education, promoting affordability, reducing environmental impact, enabling skill development, fostering innovation, and promoting economic sustainability. It is essential to invest in digital education infrastructure, teacher training, and curriculum development to ensure that digital education can reach all students in India and contribute to sustainable development.

It would be incorrect to state that MOOCs should be sidelined as it is the contemporary form of learning which has emerged with the change in time. MOOCs, although they offer immense choices of educational programs but the programs should act as complementaries to traditional educational initiatives rather than as substitutes. Apart from that, the infrastructure in terms of network and tools should be pushed further for deeper penetration that can help in

curbing the problem of the digital divide and also focus on sensitizing the public on the importance of women's education to ensure equal access to women to different specialized courses offered by MOOCs. MOOCs are a very ambitious as well as a productive initiative, but it requires a lot of critical thinking before it is implemented in India. Apart from that, it should also be used as a tool for setting benchmarks in different course curriculums to push different institutions for qualitative growth through healthy competition.

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