



THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

Is India's demographic dividend generation ready for the future?

ASER findings reveal a deficit of basic skills but digital adoption could enable a compensatory paradigm shift in education



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The seventy-fifth Republic Day is a good occasion on which to reflect on our future outlook as a nation. The 21st century is India's century, some say. There are aspirations that by 2050, when India celebrates its 100th Republic Day, it will be one of the largest economies in the world and a developed country in per-capita income terms. How well prepared are we to achieve these goals?

This question is addressed here through the lens of the *Annual Survey of Education (Rural) 2023 Report* (ASER 2023) released last week. The ASER basic survey of children in the age group of 3-16 years is recognized as a very reliable and up-to-date assessment of the status of education in rural India. In 2016, instead of the basic survey, ASER launched a new series, 'Beyond Basics,' which surveyed the education status of children in the 14-18 age group. It is the group which is moving beyond the eight years of basic education guaranteed under the Right to Education Act. This age group has been surveyed again in 2023 with nearly 35,000 respondents drawn from randomly selected villages in 28 districts across 27 states.

This age cohort is at the entry point of their working life. They and the next few batches to follow will constitute the backbone of the Indian workforce over the next 25 years. Whether or not India can leverage its 'demographic dividend' to meet its developed-country aspirations depends critically on the capacity and skill levels of these age cohorts. ASER 2023 provides several findings to address this issue, some disappointing and others more hope-inspiring.

Of survey respondents at age 14, nearly 96% have enrolled for further education beyond the basic level. That ratio drops to 66% by age 18. Most are studying in classes X, XI and XII and some are in college, with little difference between enrolment of boys and girls. About a third of those enrolled are combining their studies with work outside home. Among those not enrolled, that ratio is higher at over 50%. Interestingly, less than 6% are seeking vocational education, presumably because they do not believe it will help them find jobs. This points to the failure of our vocational training programmes.

What basic reading and arithmetic skills have been picked up by respondents in this age group of students who have completed their basic education? ASER tests indicate that 26% of respondents in the group could not read class II level Hindi. Only 43% can read a sentence in English, but about a quarter of them showed no understanding of its meaning. Only 43% could do a simple division, with a slightly lower proportion among girls. The full impact of this huge deficit in basic reading and arithmetic skills showed up when the respondents



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were asked to do simple applied tasks that required the use of these basic skills, such as calculating lengths, measuring time, reading instructions for oral rehydration or performing simple financial calculations. Not surprisingly, the skill deficit turned out to be much higher among those who failed to clear the tests for basic reading and arithmetic skills. In other words, the basic skill deficits get significantly amplified when applied to the actual performance of simple, practical tasks.

What kind of tasks can these new entrants to the workforce perform except those requiring a very low level of skills? A large proportion of India's present 14-18 age cohort and those approaching this age group have already missed the conventional learning bus. It will take years if not decades to, hopefully, fix these deficits among younger age cohorts. But by then the country's 'demographic dividend' window may close. If these skill disadvantages of the workforce get added on to India's well-known deficit in logistics, high energy costs and high regulatory compliance costs, how can the country compete successfully in the global economy?

That was my disappointing takeaway from the ASER report. But there is also an important positive takeaway relating to access, awareness, owner-

ship and skills in using digital devices. Only 9% of those interviewed own computers and most know how to use it. But about a third of those who do not have computers also know how to use them. More exciting is the fact that nearly 90% of respondents have access to smartphones, and 92% of them know how to use these devices. As for the use of smartphones, the large majority use it for movies and songs, 57% use it for games and 28% have used it for online services. The really good news, however, is that 61% of respondents have used a smartphone for educational purposes. This age cohort has a huge deficit in basic language and arithmetic skills, which gets amplified in actual application to practical tasks. This would seem to condemn them to lives of low skills and low productivity jobs at low wages. However, it may be possible to compensate at least partly for their deficits by leveraging their

high awareness, access and skills in the use of digital devices. This would be a whole new paradigm of learning in the emerging digital age, led by technical change in the fast-emerging field of artificial intelligence (AI). This new pedagogic approach need not replace the old education system. Instead, the new paradigm can be used in parallel with and in support of the old learning paradigm.

These are the author's personal views.

QUICK READ

A large proportion of India's 14-18 age cohort has already missed the conventional learning bus and our 'demographic dividend' window may close by the time we can address the deficit.

Telecom connectivity and digital enablers offer some cause for hope as it might yet be possible for online education to play a complementary role in getting left-behinds up to speed.

These are the author's personal views.

It has become way too easy to clone President Biden's voice

AI voice cloning represents a significant threat to every democracy



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A fake 'robocall' by Joe Biden has revived anxiety over AI misuse

After targeting politicians in the UK, Slovakia and other parts of the world, audio scammers have finally made their splash in the US. They cloned President Joe Biden's voice and turned it into a robocall, a campaign tactic that goes back to the 1970s.

Welcome to 2024, where the political voice you hear on the phone might have been conjured on the internet.

The automated phone message alarmed election experts when it went out over the weekend, playing a voice edited to sound just like Biden, and telling New Hampshire residents not to vote in Tuesday's Democratic primary. "Save your vote for the November election," it said, before tacking on a Biden catchphrase: "What a bunch of malarkey."

Misinformation researchers are rightly worried about so-called audio deepfakes emerging at the start of a big election year, when roughly half the world will be casting a ballot. While fake videos and pictures are eye-catching and dramatic, fake audio clips are more dangerous. Think of them as the mosquito of misinformation. They're small and easy to produce, tough to spot and almost impossible to track. And they can spread false information to disastrous effect. Last year, for instance, a Slovakian political party may well have lost a national election because an audio deepfake of its leader went viral two days before the vote.

Governments are well aware of the problem. Biden himself signed an executive order late last year that tries to steer how AI is developed without putting the public at risk. But the genie is already out of the bottle. There are dozens of companies offering tools to clone any voice, including your own or someone else's, with some more strict about fakes than others.

A British AI company Synthesia, for instance, sells software for making voice and video clones of real people—often for developing corporate training videos—and forbids customers from generating political or news content. To ensure that rules aren't broken, when customers try to generate videos of their clones, a team of content moderators watches these before they're fully generated and sent to users.

But other companies don't police what their customers are making. Another tool called HeyGen went viral last week when someone used it to alter a Davos speech by Spanish-speaking Argentine President Javier Milei. It showed him using fluent English in his own voice while his lips matched the translated words. HeyGen, however, relies on customers to get per-

mission to clone the voices of others, including politicians.

The video of Milei drew an appreciative audience, but it could have gone the other way had his words been misconstrued. By putting the onus on customers to be responsible, HeyGen's technology seems more vulnerable at this point to misuse than Synthesia's.

Some AI companies have found themselves playing a game of whack-a-mole to stop people from misusing their systems. ElevenLabs, a popular AI voice-generating service for translating audio books or podcasts, tightened its enforcement efforts last year after people from the web forum '4chan' used it to make deepfake voices of Emma Watson, Joe Rogan and other celebrities saying racist things.

And then even if all the AI companies strictly policed what audio deepfakes were made, bad actors could still turn to open-source alternatives that offer far more freedom. There are plenty of them. One of the most recent projects is a voice-cloning tool called OpenVoice from researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Tsinghua University in Beijing, and members of AI startup MyShell. The tool allows anyone to clone voices "with unparalleled precision... using just a small audio clip," as its creators said on X.

Little wonder that the US Federal Trade Commission recently promised a \$25,000 reward for anyone who can come up with a viable solution to the problem of AI voice cloning. So far, there's no technical fix, as misinformation experts say that new software designed to distinguish cloned voices are still unreliable.

The Biden robocall spotlighted a sobering reality that was already apparent to misinformation experts as well as other countries and political leaders who've been targeted with AI generated voices. With varying policies, remarkably lax enforcement rules from platforms like Facebook and a growing pool of free tools that scammers can use with impunity, voice cloning will grow and our institutions will have to grapple with the chaos.

For now and possibly for a long time to come, the onus will once again be on us to be more adversarial and cautious towards what we hear—even when it's on our very own phones.

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MY VIEW | PEN DRIVE

Indian TV's soap opera needs some background music

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Dramatic close-ups and unexpected plot twists reign supreme as two heroes from opposing teams fiercely negotiate the terms of their cooperation. Meanwhile, another two characters make us suspend disbelief as they tear apart their friendship with over-the-top drama, whose fallout even threatens to upset the talks between the first two. Captain America and the Winter Soldier? Nope! I'm just talking about what's playing out between Disney Star and Reliance Industries on one hand, and Sony and Zee on the other.

India is a complex media market where success is contingent upon the ability to adapt to local audience behaviour, their demand for culturally relevant content, and manoeuvring through an ever-developing policy landscape. Global media giants that have tried to go it alone in India have inevitably failed. Right from the early 1990s, as Rupert Murdoch's Star TV transformed into India's largest broadcaster by going after the

Hindi-speaking audience, we have seen Viacom, Turner, Disney and many others Indianize. This is true for almost any large market in the world, including Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Korea, Latin America and the Middle East North Africa region, to name just a few.

Disney has had a chequered run in India. Its first attempt to enter the market in the 90s came apart quickly. Its second attempt with the progressive acquisition of Ronnie Screwvala's UTV was a much more solid proposition. It propelled Disney to the top of the kids' broadcasting pile with Hungama TV and made it the most premium Bollywood force, thanks to UTV Motion Pictures. I was fortunate to have had a front seat watching the early part of Disney's growth in India over my 13 years at UTV. However, what really changed Disney's hold on India was the 2019 mother of all deals: Its \$71 billion acquisition of 21st Century Fox. With it came India's Star TV and Hotstar, making Disney the largest broadcaster in India and also a neck-to-neck competitor of Netflix in direct-to-consumer digital subscriptions.

The most gripping stories always have their main protagonists encounter their deepest challenge when they are at the top.

And just like that, Hotstar too suffered a big blow with its loss of Indian Premier League streaming rights, sparking a sharp subscriber drop. Coupled with it were impacts from the covid pandemic, high spending on its global Disney+ service and questions around what to do with the company's non-core US assets. Disney's solution was to align interests with Reliance, with the latter expected to have a majority stake in a forthcoming merger between Reliance's media business and Disney-Star. With it, Disney's India business will be back to having an Indian partner shareholder, and that too, one of India's strongest.

The Indian audio-video entertainment industry stands at a crossroads, marked by that transformative Disney-Reliance deal and the inevitable breakdown of the Zee-Sony merger. The latter would have created a giant that could've rivalled the coming together of Dis-

ney Hotstar and Jio Cinema. The emergence of one mega-player that controls almost a third of all general entertainment viewing in India could have a wide impact, touching even big-budget advertisers. Media planners will expect to pay a higher premium for an audience chunk available at one stop. Especially when that one player also happens to be India's largest telecom firm with the most enviable direct-to-consumer reach.

Many will benefit from these developments. Waiting in the wings, like the quintessential frenemy in all stories, is the content creation industry. Creators would already be counting on new opportunities, as demand for more dynamic and innovative content to feed this giant would certainly increase.

The Zee-Sony plotline has not concluded yet. Sony's decision to call off the merger is just the midpoint in this story arc. This will play out for months at arbitrations in

Singapore and Indian tribunals. Don't count out the institutional shareholders or activist shareholders of Zee who have seen the value of their holdings go down sharply after the break-up. They could force changes at the board and management levels and make conditions right for Sony again. Or perhaps a new knight might emerge to sweep Zee off its feet. I can think of many conglomerates in India with media aspirations. Zee also seems like the perfect damsel-in-distress candidate. It has already missed a \$200 million payment to Disney for ICC cricket broadcasting rights—part of a larger deal valued at more than \$1.3 billion over its lifetime. So significant is this cricket-rights deal that it might end up devaluing Disney Star by up to \$2 billion in the acquisition math for Reliance. There must also be merger-deal memo penalty clause payments that Zee might have to deal with. If Indian media is a spectacle, then what's going on right now is nothing short of a soap opera.

Early in my career at UTV, I worked for a few years on soap operas for Malaysian audiences. It feels apt to quote what my then Canadian-Indian boss Firdaus Kharas used to say at screenings: "This really needs some background music."

QUICK READ

Plot twists reign as Reliance and Disney work out an alliance even as the drama of the Zee-Sony split threatens a fallout that could potentially upset negotiations between the first two.

Zee could see a shareholder rebellion and a new suitor but its missed payment to Disney as part of a big cricket deal could hit Disney's Indian assets and complicate talks with Reliance.