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Topic:- Digital Transformation in Pakistan: Bridging or Widening the Urban-Rural Divide

Outline

1. Introduction

Thesis Statement: The

debate on digital transformation in Pakistan resolves around whether it bridges the urban-rural divide or widens it. While some argue that it is, in fact, increasing the gap between urban and rural areas.

2. The Current Status of digital literacy in rural and Urban areas

3. Digital transformation in Pakistan is widening the urban-rural divide (Thesis)

(a) There is poor infrastructure of internet Penetration in rural areas

(b) Low literacy and lack of awareness Prevent rural citizens from benefiting from

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digitalization

(c) Citizens in remote areas cannot operate

Smartphones properly

(d) In rural areas citizens do not have

capacity to bear the cost of smartphones

and internet

(e) Citizens of remote areas cannot understand

language despite their local language

(f) Women in rural areas cannot have little

or no access to smartphones

(g) Frequent electricity shortages hinder

digital adaption

4. Digital Transformation in Pakistan is bridging the Urban-Rural divide (Antithesis)

(a) Government has introduced digital skills

development programs

(b) Rural centric tech apps are bridging

the gap

(c) Localized apps have been developed to

Promote inclusivity

5. Ground realities show the divide is widening (Synthesis)

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(a) Without basic access to internet and devices, skills programs remain ineffective

(b) Rural-focused apps have very limited usage in practice

(c) Localized apps are failing due to language and literacy issues

b- Conclusion

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Essay

The wave of digitalization in Pakistan has spread unevenly: while a child in a city learns coding, a child in Balochistan still studies from old books under the shade of a tree, where no school exists on the hot, arid land. This sharp contrast raises a serious question: is digital transformation bridging the gap, or widening it? In short, the debate on digital transformation in Pakistan revolves around whether it bridges the urban-rural divide or widens it. While some argue that it creates opportunities for inclusion, ground realities show that it is,

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, in fact, increasing the gap between urban and rural areas. The current status of digital literacy in rural urban areas also confirms this. To validate this thesis, there exists many arguments. These include the poor infrastructure of internet penetration in rural areas. Moreover, in rural areas citizens do not have capacity to bear the cost of smartphones and internet. Further, citizens in ~~that~~^{rural} areas do not have command on different languages except than local language which increases the divide. In the same vein, women in rural areas have little or no access to smartphones. Nevertheless, there are people who believe that digital transformation in Pakistan is bridging the urban-rural divide. To substantiate, they present variety of arguments like government has introduced digital skills development programs. Furthermore, rural centric apps are now bridging the gap. However, by looking at these points, one may say that they are not valid

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and build on shaky foundations.

To develop deeper understanding of the topic, one has to unfold the current status of digital literacy in rural and urban areas of the country. According to World Bank World Urbanization report 2024, at the start of 2024, 38.2 percent Pakistanis population lived in urban centres, while 61.8 percent lived in rural areas. According to this report urban population is lower. On the other hand, the Population and Housing Census 2023 shows a significant urban-rural divide. The digital literacy rate of urban areas is 74 percent and the digital literacy rate of rural areas is 52 percent. The urban rural literacy gap is 22 percent, which means nearly 1 in every 5 people in rural areas lag behind their urban counterparts in digital literacy. Thus, this digital transformation in Pakistan is widening the urban-rural divide.

One of the chief

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arguments that validate the thesis is that the weak infrastructure of internet penetration in rural areas has widened the gap. The rural areas have no proper infrastructure to support internet connectivity. Moreover, they do not have access to reliable electricity. Therefore, rural areas have lacked behind and the gap is widening. Further, due to improper infrastructure citizens struggle to get internet connection and it becomes expensive too. According to National Broadband report September 2024, in places like Tharparkar, Chitral, and parts of Balochistan, connectivity often rests on outdated 2G and 3G networks or none at all due to poor infrastructure. Hence, the poor infrastructure of internet penetration in rural areas has widened the gap.

Moving to the next important point that justifies the thesis is that the low literacy rate and lack of awareness prevent rural citizens

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from ~~benefi~~ getting benefit from digitalization.

The lack of literacy in rural citizens

limits their knowledge and widens the

gap. Moreover, the limited literacy limits

the awareness in rural citizens. At the

same time, if a few people have

access to smartphones and internet, but they

have no idea how to use them ~~or~~ to

get required benefit. Therefore, many rural

people are limited to TikTok, WhatsApp, and

Facebook. They do not use internet and

smartphones for learning skills or educating

themselves. For instance, in Rahim Yar Khan, a

farmland might scroll celebrity reels on

TikTok or Facebook but remain clueless

about using mobile banking, searching for

crop advice, or applying for jobs online.

Ergo, low literacy and lack of awareness

prevent rural citizens from getting benefit.

Another crucial argument

that supports the thesis is that the

citizens of rural areas cannot

operate smartphones properly. It is because

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Even citizens recognize the benefits of digital platforms, they are unable to utilize them due to technical limitations. Moreover, the mismatch of language and simple tasks like installing applications or navigating settings requires external help. Further, the generational gap again make this gap wide. Therefore, citizens in remote areas face problems. According to Pakistan Digital Learning Landscape Analysis, Smartphones technologies are often designed with urban, connected users in mind. Most technology tools assume that stable connectivity and high operational skills. This confirms that citizens of the rural areas cannot use smartphones properly.

It is also essential to highlight that in rural areas citizens do not have capacity to bear the cost of smartphones and internet. They have limited means of earning. Moreover, a significant number of people do not have jobs, they work as a daily

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wagers. Further, the people living in rural areas do farming and their livelihoods depend on it. There are many rural areas which are away from cities with distance of many kilometers. Therefore, people living in rural areas have limited amount money. Thus, they use that money for their necessary household items, health, and their animals or agriculture, instead of using the amount for smartphones and internet. For example, A man living in Thar having limited amount of money. He lives with in joint family have many people to feed. He will definitely Prioritizes buying a buffalo rather than buying a smartphone of 50000 which will further cost him every month. This illustrates that in rural areas citizens do not have capacity to bear the cost of smartphones and internet.

A subsequent factor

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to consider is that citizens in remote areas cannot understand language despite their local language. In many provinces of Pakistan local languages are medium of instruction. Further, in rural areas the major focus is the local language. Teachers in schools speak and teach local language. It is because they do not have proper knowledge about other languages. In rural areas of KPK, Sindh, Balochistan, and Punjab books in local areas are in local language. Therefore, citizens of remote area are unable to understand English and Urdu which helps in using smartphones and internet.

Another key point to note is that women in rural areas have little or no access to smartphones. In Pakistan's rural areas, women remain on the wrong side of the digital wall. It is because ~~the~~ the limited awareness about smartphones

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and internet has portrayed the wrong image of digital space. Moreover, the increased trend of deepfake has also impacted the mindset of Pakistani society. The society of the country is based on male dominated structure. Further when a male counterpart of female watches vulgar videos and images on social media he does not give permission to get smartphone to her mother, wife, and daughter. According to Digital Rights Foundation, 2022 Report. Field interviews in Punjab and Khyberpakhtunkhwa show many families associate women's mobile use with "immodesty" or "vulgarity". Parents and husbands often restrict access because phones are seen as enabling "bad company" or moral decline. This signifies that women in rural areas have limited or no access to smartphones and internet.

Equally important point is that frequent electricity shortages hinder digital adoption. In various rural areas

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the infrastructure of electricity is poor and electricity shortage is frequent. Moreover, the growing energy crisis in Pakistan has impacted rural areas. Further, all urban areas get energy supplies properly but rural areas are suffering from electricity shortages. Additionally, the load-shedding last up to 15-18 hours daily in many villages. This severely limits phone charging, internet use and e-learning. Reports from Sindh, Balochistan and South Punjab often show students unable to attend online classes during COVID-19 because electricity outages coincided with online school timings. (Dawn, Digital Blackout Due to Power Outages, January 2023) This proves that frequent electricity shortages hinder digital adoption.

Notwithstanding this pretence, there is another view that suggest digital transformation in Pakistan is bridging the urban-rural divide. To verify this, the opponents present various

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arguments and the major among them is that Government has introduced digital skills development programs. The Government of Pakistan has developed many e-learning programs. These programs teach digital skills and are online available at the website. Moreover, these are free of cost and provide certificate to the students. Therefore, these e-learning programs have potential to bridge the gap between urban-rural divide. Moreover, people living in rural areas can get easy access to these platforms and learn many things such as freelancing, digital marketing, and graphic designing. For instance, Higher Pakistan Khwa Information Technology Board (KPITB) has launched digital jobs program in collaboration with United Nations Development program, this program has trained over 13,000 youth including more than 4,000 women. This indicates that government introduced digital skills development program is bridging the gap.

In the same vein,

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rural-centric technology apps are bridging the gap. There are various numbers of apps are developed by government specialists focusing the rural areas. These apps are helping in bridging the rural - urban gap. Moreover, the apps which are developed by government especially focus on farming methods, agriculture, and connects farmers to market directly. Therefore, these apps are ensuring rural empowerment through digital transformation. For example, Kisan Dost app connects rural farmers directly with markets provide the information of price and offer digital financial services. Further, this app reduces the dependency on middlemen and empowers farmers. This displays that rural-centric apps are bridging the divide.

By the same token, localized apps have been developed to promote inclusivity. The apps developed by government with localized services and languages are helping in achieving

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~~Service~~ Services. The local people who are unable to deal with English or Urdu are now doing their work using local language. Moreover, these apps ~~helps~~ help in consultations but in local language. Localized apps increase digital literacy, participation, and inclusion, although the impact is still constrained by connectivity and device access in remote areas. A study by Pakistan Telecommunication Authority 2023, notes that apps providing content in local languages see higher adoption in rural areas. This supports that localized apps have been developed to promote inclusivity and they are showing success.

However, the claim made earlier by the opponents regarding government has introduced digital skills development programs to bridge the divide is not valid. It is because that without basic access to internet and devices, skills programs remain ineffective. Digital skills programs

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cannot reach to their goal, when there is no proper infrastructure and internet.

The main focus of these programs is to bridge the urban-rural gap, but before implementing these programs, Government has to fix the infrastructure, connectivity and devices issues in digital areas. Even if these problems occur in urban areas, they cannot even participate in these programs.

Therefore, fixing these issue is necessary otherwise this initiative is will remain ineffective in bridging urban-rural digital literacy gap. According to a combine study of LUMS and World Bank 2023, digital literacy programs alone cannot reduce the urban-rural divide without addressing infrastructure. This validates that without basic access to internet and devices, skills programs remain ineffective.

In the same way, the argument related to rural-centric tech apps bridging the gap is not justified. It is due to the fact that rural

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focused apps have very limited usage in practice. In many rural areas of the country people are not aware about any digital app. Furthermore, these apps also require basic literacy and navigation skills. Villagers in rural areas lack the skills and navigation proficiency. Further, the access of internet is very low in rural areas. Therefore, these apps are less effective in rural areas. According to Digital Pakistan Policy report 2022, less than 25 percent of rural smartphone users reported knowing about government or private apps designed for agriculture, health, or education. This highlights that rural-focused apps have very limited usage in practice it cannot bridge the gap.

In the same fashion, the point related to localized apps have been developed to promote inclusivity holds no power. Due to the reason that localized apps are failing due to language and literacy issues. Despite the availability of

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localized ~~rem~~ the effectiveness of these apps remain limited. Many apps are not available in local languages. Further, low literacy levels in rural areas prevent widespread adoption and meaningful use of these apps. As a result, these tools fail to achieve their intended goal of reducing the urban-rural digital divide. According to population and Housing Census 2023, Low literacy prevents users from reading apps instructions, filling forms, or understanding digital content, rendering apps ineffective. This verifies that localized apps are failing due to language and literacy issues.

To encapsulate the whole discussion, it has been validated through various arguments that digital transformation in Pakistan is widening the urban-rural divide. Arguments like the poor infrastructure of internet and low literacy and awareness prevent rural citizens from getting benefits. Moreover, citizens in rural

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do not have access to smartphones properly and they do not have capacity to bear the cost of internet and smartphones.

However, opponents of the topic presented their view through points such as government has introduced digital skills development programs and rural-centric tech apps to bridge the gap. Nonetheless, these arguments were neglected through strong points that last, confirming the pretence that digital transformation in Pakistan is widening the urban-rural divide.