Book Review

IT Experience in India: Bridging the Digital Divide

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IT Experience in India: Bridging the Digital Divide is a fairly slim tome of some essays from a diversity of authors who presented papers at a conference in Bangalore, Karnataka, India, in December 1999. The essays explore various aspects of the IT experience in India from both policy and practical perspectives. Given that five years since the conference will soon have elapsed, it is not surprising that events have moved on somewhat since the ideas encapsulated in these papers were first committed to paper. Nevertheless, there is useful source material in this edited collection of papers, in particular for students of IT in developing countries, with particular reference to India. Many of the authors are themselves Indian and those that are not exhibit a noteworthy competence in their familiarity with the Indian context. Whether the digital divide really is bridged as a result of the publication of this book, I am not so sure – it is certainly one more step in the right direction, but there is a long way to go.

Unfortunately, the quality of the editing leaves something to be desired – it would have been helpful if the editors had decided to include a comprehensive bibliography for all ten chapters. There is also little in the way of structure in terms of the way the papers are organised. Perhaps the editors had no such structural intentions, but from a reader’s perspective, a structure would have the merit of organising the various chapters into something more coherent than the current arrangement.

Notwithstanding the limitations identified above, the individual chapters themselves offer fascinating accounts of bridge-building activities and opportunities in the Indian context. These include the Information Village experience in Pondicherry, chapters on the liberalisation of telecommunications regulations, eGovernance issues for the poor, and discussions about the creation of digital resources in Indian languages. In his opening chapter, Keniston synthesises what he terms “an unstated consensus” with respect to ICTs, namely: “Information technologies should be introduced when (and only when) they constitute the most effective way of meeting basic human needs and fulfilling fundamental human rights” (pp. 21-22). The spirit of these recommendations is that ICT application must be sensitive to local norms and should never be viewed either as a panacea or indeed as the “first line of attack” in the struggle with “poverty, misery and injustice”. “The utility of ICTs must always be judged against the role they can play in meeting core human needs” (p.22). Keniston goes on to identify a number of practical propositions relating to the role of ICTs in the developing country context. Key among these are the realisation that “local language and local content are essential” (p.25) and “projects must be economically self-sustaining” (p.26). Finally, he observes that “the voices and interests of the disadvantaged need to be represented in bodies that make ICT policy concerning regulation and infrastructure” (p.32). All too often, it would appear, these voices and interests are precisely those that are not represented – directly or indirectly – and this is what bridging the digital divide entails.

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