



Rules and rulers

1. It does seem that most if not all global social media giants will miss complying with the new IT rules of intermediaries, which come into effect today.
2. It would be unfortunate if this non-compliance were to trigger a further worsening of the already poor relationship between some social media players and the Government.
3. Among other things, they require the bigger social media platforms, which the rules referred to as significant social media intermediaries, to adhere to a vastly tighter set of rules.
4. They require these platforms to appoint chief compliance officers, in order to make sure the rules are followed, nodal officers, to coordinate with law enforcement agencies, and grievance officers.
5. Another rule requires messaging platforms such as WhatsApp to trace problematic messages to their originators, raising uneasy questions about how services that are end-to-end encrypted can adhere to this.
6. There are indeed many problems with the new rules, not the least of which is the manner in which they were introduced without much public consultation. There has also been criticism about bringing in a plethora of new rules that ought to be normally triggered only via legislative action.

Non-compliance

1. But non-compliance can only make things worse, especially in a situation in which the relationship between some platforms such as Twitter and the Government seems to have broken down.
2. The latest stand-off between them, over Twitter tagging certain posts by BJP spokespeople as 'manipulated media', has even resulted in the Delhi Police visiting the company's offices.
3. Separately, the Government has been fighting WhatsApp over its new privacy rules. Whatever the back-story, it is important that social media companies fight the new rules in a court of law if they find them to be problematic.
4. The other option, that of engaging with the Government, may not work in these strained times. But stonewalling on the question of compliance can never



be justified, even if it is to be assumed that the U.S. Government has their back.

5. Facebook, on its part, has made all the right noises. It has said that it aims to comply with the new rules but also needs to engage with the Government on a few issues. What is important is that the genuine concerns of social media companies are taken on board.

Still grappling with online classes

Context: A year since the outbreak of COVID-19, online education remains a chimera in India. Notwithstanding their preparedness, higher education institutions were directed by the government to shift from classroom education to online education without taking cognisance of changes needed in infrastructure, training, etc. This was mandated even though the government spent merely 3.2% of its GDP on education in 2020-21.

Differences within institutions

1. The financial health of state universities in the country is an open secret. While centrally funded elite institutes such as the IITs, IIMs, NITs and Central universities launched video channels and uploaded e-content on institutional websites and digital platforms, a majority of the state universities still struggle without proper Internet connectivity and bandwidth in their campuses.
2. State universities are only able to provide salaries on time. The move to online learning especially came as a surprise for overburdened teachers given that there are several vacant faculty positions in universities across India.
3. This move also came as a shock for the students, many of whom are distressed by the COVID-19 situation. Many of them also lack the facilities to attend online classes.
4. Teachers and students had a sense of déjà vu as they had a similar experience when the annual scheme of teaching and regular courses was replaced by the semester scheme of teaching and the choice-based credit system earlier.

In a phased manner:

1. A transition from conventional classroom teaching and learning to online education need to be done in a phased manner. State universities should first equip their infrastructure (both hard and soft) with wholehearted government support.

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2. There are 993 universities, 39,931 colleges, 3.73 crore students and 14.16 lakh teachers in India, according to the All India Survey on Higher Education (2018-19).
3. If such a drastic decision was to be taken, there should have been wider consultation between the government and all the academic stakeholders to find a way forward.
4. With Internet penetration still low in India, it is incumbent on the government to allow suitable financial aids to state universities to obtain appropriate IT tools, platforms, devices, provide training, etc. before initiating such an exercise.
5. Else, given the difference in students' access to digital education, their performances are also bound to differ. This creates an asymmetrical society and leads to anxiety among the students. Most importantly, education is denied to the less privileged student community.

Study material

1. Another predicament in online education is the preparation of appropriate study material. Policymakers need to acknowledge that merely uploading scanned lecture notes or PowerPoint presentations does not serve any meaningful purpose.
2. There is no imaginative thinking and exploring, no application-based learning for students. For practical field and laboratory-based learning, the whole idea of online education could prove to be a disaster.
3. Given that there is talk of more COVID-19 waves, it is imperative for the government to embrace a pragmatic approach by engaging all academic stakeholders and investing generously in online education as suggested by the Fifteenth Finance Commission in its report.
4. Development of massive open online courses (MOOCs), direct-to-home (DTH) content development, digital classrooms and provision of devices (laptop/tablets) for 25 lakh students belonging to the socially and economically weaker sections of society, especially in state universities, would help.