

Weekend Read | Edition 55

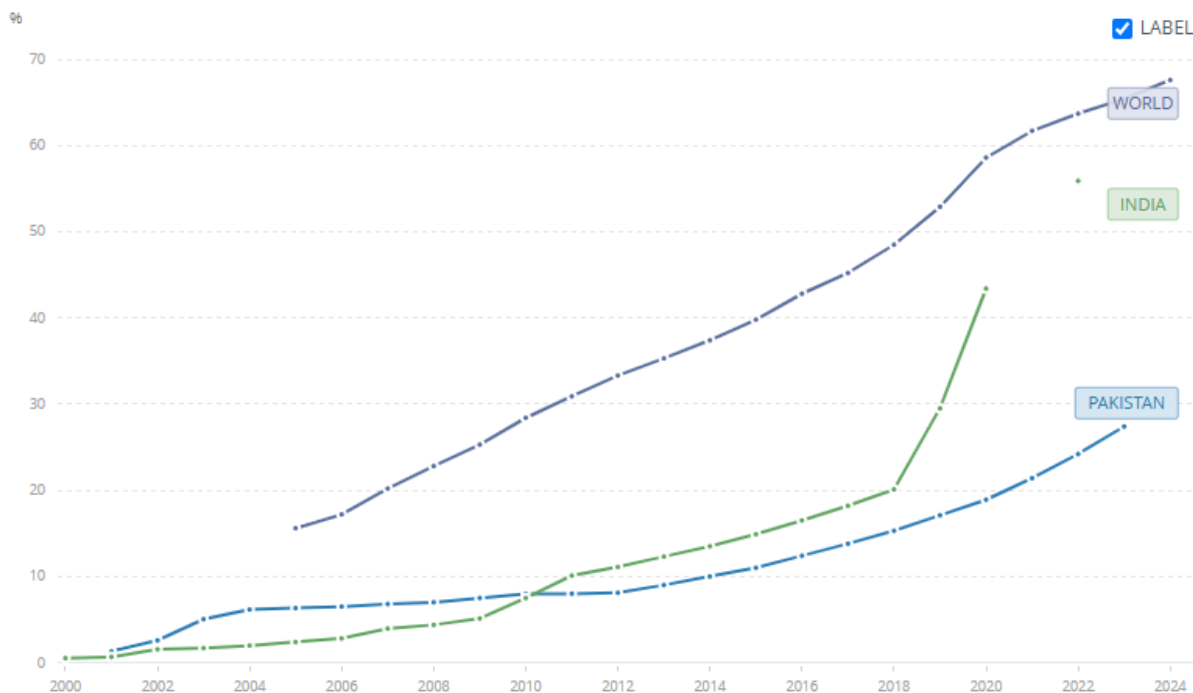
Internet Penetration in South Asia:

Pakistan Was Ahead — But India Took the Lead



Internet Penetration in South Asia: Pakistan Was Ahead — But India Took the Lead

The digital revolution has transformed the world in unprecedented ways, reshaping economies, societies, and individual lives. Nowhere is this transformation more evident than in South Asia, where the journey of internet penetration tells a compelling story of rapid growth, challenges, and opportunities. This report delves into the fascinating evolution of internet usage in India and Pakistan, two neighbouring countries with shared histories but divergent paths in their digital journeys.



Country	Most Recent Year	Most Recent Value
India	2022	56
Pakistan	2023	27
World	2024	68

Source: International Telecommunication Union (ITU) World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators Database

Early Trends in Internet Penetration

In the early 2000s, Pakistan was ahead of India in terms of internet penetration—a lesser-known fact. Both countries started near zero in the '90s, but Pakistan made faster initial strides, crossing 5% usage by the mid-2000s, compared to India's slower uptake. This early edge in digital access for Pakistan can be attributed to quicker deregulation, earlier ISP growth, and initial urban connectivity. The early 2000s saw Pakistan implementing policies

that encouraged private sector participation in the telecom industry, which led to a more competitive market and faster growth in internet services.

Shift in Trends Post-2010

The game changed post-2010. India surged ahead, especially after 2016, while Pakistan's growth continued but at a slower pace. By 2021, Pakistan reached around 21% internet penetration, while India skyrocketed to over 40%. This shift can be linked to India's aggressive policy and market strategies, including initiatives like Digital India, the proliferation of affordable smartphones, and competitive pricing among telecom providers. The launch of Reliance Jio in 2016, which offered extremely affordable data plans, played a pivotal role in boosting internet adoption in India. This period also saw significant investments in 4G infrastructure, making high-speed internet more accessible to the masses.

Current Status and Comparative Analysis

As of the latest data, India has approximately 56% internet penetration, while Pakistan has around 27%. India's rapid increase suggests it may soon catch up closer towards global averages if current trends continue. Pakistan's growth, while slower, is expected to continue its upward trajectory. The disparity in growth rates can be attributed to several factors, including differences in economic policies, levels of investment in digital infrastructure, and the overall regulatory environment. India's focus on digital inclusion and its efforts to bridge the urban-rural divide have been more pronounced, contributing to its faster growth.

Implications

The increasing internet penetration has profound implications for economic development, social inclusion, and access to information. Higher internet usage can lead to improved educational outcomes, greater access to healthcare services, and enhanced economic opportunities through e-commerce and digital entrepreneurship. However, it also raises concerns about cybersecurity, data privacy, and the digital divide between urban and rural areas. In India, the rise in internet usage has facilitated the growth of the digital economy, with sectors like e-commerce, fintech, and online education witnessing significant expansion. In Pakistan, while there has been progress, the slower growth rate indicates that more efforts are needed to ensure that the benefits of internet connectivity reach all segments of the population.

Policy and Administrative Suggestions

To sustain and enhance these positive trends, several policy and administrative measures can be considered. Continued investment in broadband infrastructure, especially in rural and underserved areas, is crucial. This includes expanding fiber optic networks and improving mobile internet coverage. Implementing comprehensive digital literacy programs to educate individuals on the benefits and safe use of the internet can help bridge the digital divide. Ensuring that internet services remain affordable through subsidies or competitive pricing

strategies can encourage higher adoption rates. Strengthening cybersecurity frameworks to protect users from online threats and ensuring robust data privacy regulations are essential to build trust in digital services. Providing support and incentives for digital startups and entrepreneurs can foster innovation and economic growth.

By implementing thoughtful policies and administrative measures, governments can ensure that the benefits of internet connectivity are accessible to all, fostering inclusive growth and development. The story of internet penetration in South Asia is one of both progress and potential. While India has made remarkable strides, Pakistan has the opportunity to reclaim its early momentum by addressing the challenges and leveraging its strengths to drive digital transformation.



Gallup Pakistan is not related to Gallup Inc. headquartered in Washington D.C. USA. We require that our surveys be credited fully as Gallup Pakistan (not Gallup or Gallup Poll). We disclaim any responsibility for surveys pertaining to Pakistani public opinion except those carried out by Gallup Pakistan, the Pakistani affiliate of Gallup International Association

Contact Details:

Email: isb@gallup.com.pk

www.gallup.com.pk