



IMPACT OF THE DIGITAL DIVIDE ON MARGINALIZED LEARNERS IN THE ERA OF DIGITAL EDUCATION

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.260402025>

Abstract

The rapid digitalization of education has generated new opportunities for expanding access to knowledge. However, unequal distribution of digital infrastructure, devices, and skills has created a persistent digital divide that disproportionately affects marginalized learners. This article examines the structural dimensions of digital inequality and its consequences for students from economically weaker sections, rural areas, lower castes, minority communities, and gender-marginalized groups. Drawing upon Social Reproduction Theory and the Capability Approach, the study argues that digital exclusion reinforces pre-existing socio-economic hierarchies and limits substantive educational freedoms. Based on secondary data and critical analysis, the article highlights how digital disparities influence academic performance, psychological well-being, and long-term social mobility. It concludes with policy recommendations aimed at promoting digital equity and inclusive educational development.

Keywords: *Digital Divide, Theoretical Foundations, Dimensions of the Digital Divide, Policy Recommendations*

Introduction

Digital technology has become central to educational governance and pedagogy in the twenty-first century. Online platforms, virtual classrooms, digital libraries, and e-assessments now constitute integral components of contemporary learning systems. In India, state-led initiatives such as the Digital India programme sought to expand connectivity and democratize access to knowledge resources. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the integration of digital tools into formal education. Schools and universities shifted to online modes almost overnight. While this transition ensured continuity for some students, it simultaneously exposed the deep inequalities embedded within digital infrastructure. Students without smartphones, laptops, reliable electricity, or stable internet connectivity were excluded from effective participation. Marginalized learners particularly those from rural backgrounds, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, minority communities, and economically weaker households experienced disproportionate disadvantages. The digital divide thus emerged not merely as a technical problem but as a structural extension of historical inequalities. This article critically examines how digital inequality shapes educational outcomes and social mobility. It situates the digital divide within broader debates on social justice, capability deprivation, and democratic inclusion. Statement of the problem: The rapid expansion of digital education has created new opportunities for learning, yet unequal access to digital infrastructure, devices, and internet connectivity continues to exclude many students from effective participation. Marginalized learners, particularly those from rural areas, economically weaker households, lower castes, minority communities, and gender-marginalized groups, face significant barriers in accessing digital learning resources. This inequality limits their academic engagement, affects psychological well-being, and reduces opportunities for social mobility. Consequently, the digital divide not only reflects technological disparity but also reinforces existing socio-economic hierarchies within the education system. The central problem of this study is to examine how digital exclusion reproduces structural inequalities and constrains the educational capabilities of marginalized learners in the context of expanding digital education.

Literature Review

The term “digital divide” initially referred to disparities in physical access to computers and internet connections. Early studies emphasized infrastructural gaps between developed and developing nations. However, scholars such as Jan van Dijk expanded the concept to include skills and usage divides. According to van Dijk, digital inequality is cumulative and layered, meaning that lack of access often coincides with limited digital competence and restricted opportunities.

OECD defines Digital Divide as “the gap between individuals, households, businesses, and geographic areas at different socioeconomic levels with regard both to their opportunities to access information and communication technologies (ICT) and to their use of the internet for a wide variety of activities” (OECD, 2001).

Manuel Castells, in his analysis of the network society, argued that access to information networks determines economic power and social inclusion. Individuals disconnected from digital networks risk marginalization in education, employment, and political participation. Because the network is the heart of the economy, being “unplugged” isn't just a minor inconvenience-it's a form of structural irrelevance. If a person, city, or country lacks access to these networks, they are effectively excluded from the global creation of wealth and culture.

Reports by UNESCO reveal that learning losses during the pandemic were concentrated among disadvantaged groups. UNESCO argues for a fundamental expansion of human rights. It states that the right to education must now include the right to connectivity. In a world where learning happens online, being “unplugged” is equivalent to being barred from the schoolhouse door. Similarly, national surveys in India indicate significant rural–urban disparities in internet penetration and device ownership. Although existing literature recognizes digital inequality, there remains a need for integrated theoretical analysis linking digital access with structural marginalization and capability deprivation.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Social Reproduction Theory, Castells's “network society,” and the Capability Approach. The concept of the Network Society, developed by Manuel Castells, provides an important theoretical foundation for understanding the relationship between digital technology and social inequality. Castells explains that contemporary society is increasingly structured around networks created through information and communication technologies (ICTs). These networks shape economic activities, political power, cultural exchange, and access to knowledge. In this context, information becomes the most significant resource of power and development. Therefore, individuals or groups who lack access to digital networks often face new forms of exclusion.

Castells argues that modern societies have moved from industrial structures to what he calls the “network society,” where social organization is based on digitally connected networks. These networks allow information to flow rapidly across different regions and institutions. Education, governance, and economic activities increasingly rely on digital platforms. As a result, participation in these networks becomes essential for accessing knowledge, opportunities, and social mobility.

Social Reproduction Theory explains how institutions perpetuate socio-economic hierarchies. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital illustrates how dominant groups transmit advantages across generations. In digital education systems, access to technology and digital fluency constitute forms of symbolic and cultural capital. Marginalized learners lacking these resources face structural disadvantages that reinforce inequality.

Capability Approach of Amartya Sen: The capability approach distinguishes between resources, capabilities, and functionings. Resources include material and institutional provisions such as technology, infrastructure, and educational facilities. Capabilities refer to the real opportunities individuals have to achieve certain outcomes, while functionings represent the actual achievements of individuals, such as gaining education or acquiring knowledge. This distinction is important in understanding the educational challenges created by the digital divide.

In the context of digital education, the digital divide is not limited to the absence of internet access or digital devices. It also includes disparities in digital literacy, technological infrastructure, and the ability to effectively use digital tools for learning. These inequalities restrict the capabilities of marginalized learners, especially those belonging to economically weaker sections, rural communities, and socially disadvantaged groups. Even when online educational platforms are available, students without adequate digital skills, reliable internet connectivity, or supportive learning environments cannot fully benefit from these resources.

Sen also emphasizes that individual capabilities are influenced by social, economic, and institutional conditions. Factors such as poverty, social exclusion, regional disparities, and unequal educational infrastructure affect the ability of individuals to convert available resources into meaningful outcomes. In many developing societies, marginalized learners face structural barriers that prevent them from accessing and utilizing digital learning opportunities. As a result, the digital divide reproduces existing educational inequalities. Together, these frameworks enable a multidimensional understanding of the digital divide as both structural reproduction and capability deprivation.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the structural causes of the digital divide affecting marginalized learners.
2. To analyze its impact on academic performance and learning continuity.
3. To explore its broader implications for social mobility and democratic participation.
4. To propose policy interventions aimed at ensuring digital equity.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and analytical research design. It relies on secondary data from government reports and educational surveys. International organizational publications. Scholarly works on digital inequality and education. Comparative

analysis of rural and urban digital access patterns. The approach is interpretative and critical. It connects empirical data with theoretical insights to provide a comprehensive understanding of digital exclusion.

Dimensions of the Digital Divide

1. Economic Barriers: Economic inequality remains the primary determinant of digital access. The cost of smartphones, laptops, and broadband services is prohibitive for many low-income families. Even when governments distribute devices, recurring data recharge expenses create additional burdens. Studies indicate that students from poorer households often share a single device among multiple siblings, limiting effective participation “The world is rapidly undergoing a digital transformation. India too has been catching pace. The progress of digitalization, however, has been unequal. There is a notable digital divide in the country and it mirrors the existing socioeconomic inequalities of the country.”- Oxfam India.

2. Rural–Urban Infrastructure Gap: Despite improvements in telecommunications, rural regions continue to experience inadequate network coverage and unstable electricity supply. National survey data reveal lower internet penetration rates in rural areas compared to urban centers. This infrastructural gap restricts participation in live classes, downloading study materials, and accessing multimedia content. There is also a clear rural–urban divide in digital access. Despite a significant growth rate of about 13 per cent in recent years, only around 31 per cent of the rural population uses the internet, whereas nearly 67 per cent of India’s urban population has access to internet services. Researchers have also identified a strong income-based digital divide between households. Families with higher income levels generally have greater access to digital devices and connectivity, which increases their chances of adopting information and communication technologies.

3. Gendered Digital Inequality: Gender norms shape access to technology. In several communities, boys are prioritized in access to digital devices. Girls often face restrictions due to safety concerns or socio-cultural attitudes. This disparity undermines efforts toward gender equality in education and employment. Mobile phone ownership in India shows a clear gender disparity. By the end of 2021, around 61 per cent of men owned a mobile phone, while only about 31 per cent of women had access to one, creating a gender gap of nearly 30 per cent. Although some studies argue that merely owning a mobile phone does not automatically lead to women’s empowerment, broader research indicates that access to mobile technology can reduce information poverty among women. It can also support greater independence in decision-making, expand social and support networks, and improve access to important services such as healthcare. Studies consistently show that women have lower levels of access to and use of computers and the internet compared to men. This imbalance reflects a broader gender-based digital divide. At the World Summit on the Information Society, former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan highlighted this issue, noting that women and girls often have less access to information and communication technologies than men and boys.

4. Digital Literacy and Pedagogical Challenges: Digital literacy has become a fundamental requirement in the modern education system as teaching and learning increasingly depend on digital platforms. However, many students, particularly those from rural and marginalized backgrounds, lack the necessary skills to effectively use digital tools and online learning systems. This gap in digital competence often restricts their participation in virtual classes and limits access to academic resources. At the same time, teachers face pedagogical challenges in adapting traditional classroom methods to digital environments. The sudden shift toward online education has exposed the lack of adequate training and institutional support for many educators. Therefore, strengthening digital literacy and improving digital pedagogical practices is essential for making online education more inclusive and effective.

5. Lack of Trained Teachers: A significant challenge in the effective integration of technology in education is the shortage of adequately trained teachers. Many educators in India lack the required skills and knowledge to integrate digital tools into their teaching practices. This problem is particularly visible in rural areas, where opportunities for professional development and practical training in digital pedagogy are limited. The shortage of teachers further aggravates the situation. Reports indicate that India faces a deficit of nearly 11 lakh teachers, with rural regions being the most severely affected. Evidence of this imbalance can also be seen in the existence of a large number of single-teacher schools across the country. An article published by Youth Ki Awaaz notes that approximately 1.2 lakh schools operate with only one teacher, and nearly 89 percent of these schools are located in rural areas, highlighting the serious shortage of teaching staff in rural educational institutions.

6. Psychological and Social Consequences: The rapid expansion of digital and online education has transformed the traditional structure of teaching and learning. While digital platforms have improved access to educational resources and enabled flexible learning opportunities, they have also introduced several challenges for students, particularly those from socially and economically marginalized backgrounds. The shift from physical classrooms to virtual environments often reduces direct interaction between teachers and students and changes the nature of academic support and engagement. These changes may influence students’ learning experiences, social development, and overall academic performance. In this context, it becomes important to examine some of the key challenges associated with online learning, including social isolation, limited academic support, technological barriers, problems of self-discipline and motivation, and the possible decline in communication skills among learners.

Social Isolation: The absence of regular face-to-face interaction with teachers and fellow students may create a sense of isolation. This condition can weaken social engagement and reduce students’ feeling of belonging within an academic community.

Limited Access to Academic Support: Students engaged in online learning often face difficulties in receiving immediate guidance from instructors or peers. The delay in academic assistance may affect their comprehension of course materials and overall learning outcomes.

Problems of Self-Discipline and Motivation: In the absence of a structured classroom environment, some learners struggle with time management, concentration, and sustained motivation. As a result, their engagement with academic content may decline, affecting performance.

Decline in Communication Skills: Limited physical interaction in digital learning environments may restrict the development of important communication abilities, such as public speaking, attentive listening, and the interpretation of non-verbal expressions.

Policy Recommendations

1. Expand Digital Infrastructure: Increase investment in rural broadband and stable electricity supply.
2. Subsidized Devices and Data: Provide affordable smartphones and data packages to economically weaker students.
3. Digital Literacy Training: Introduce structured digital skill programmes in schools and community centers.
4. Teacher Capacity Building: Strengthen digital pedagogy through professional training.
5. Gender-Sensitive Interventions: Promote equal device access for girls through targeted schemes.
6. Localized and Accessible Content: Develop multilingual and disability-inclusive educational materials.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this study demonstrates that the digital divide is not merely a technological gap but a structural inequality that reflects broader socio-economic disparities within society. The findings show that marginalized learners face multiple and overlapping barriers such as economic constraints, rural–urban infrastructural disparities, gendered patterns of access, limited digital literacy, and inadequate teacher training. These factors collectively affect students’ ability to participate effectively in digital education, thereby disrupting learning continuity and widening existing educational inequalities.

From a broader perspective, the implications of the digital divide extend beyond academic performance. Limited digital access restricts opportunities for skill development, reduces the capacity for upward social mobility, and may hinder meaningful participation in democratic processes that increasingly rely on digital platforms for information and civic engagement. In this sense, digital exclusion becomes a form of social exclusion, reinforcing existing hierarchies of class, gender, and geography. The study also highlights that effective digital inclusion requires a multidimensional approach that combines infrastructural development with digital literacy, pedagogical reform, and socially sensitive policies. The role of teachers is particularly crucial, as the success of digital education depends largely on their ability to integrate technology into meaningful learning practices.

Policy interventions must therefore prioritize inclusive digital ecosystems. Expanding rural connectivity, subsidizing devices and data services for disadvantaged students, strengthening teacher training, and promoting gender-sensitive access to technology are essential steps toward bridging the divide. At the same time, educational content should be culturally relevant, multilingual, and accessible to learners with different abilities and backgrounds. In conclusion, the digital divide represents a critical challenge in the era of digital education. Addressing it requires sustained policy commitment, institutional innovation, and social awareness. Only through such comprehensive efforts can digital education become a tool of empowerment rather than a mechanism that reproduces inequality, thereby ensuring that marginalized learners are not left behind in the rapidly evolving knowledge society.

Acknowledgment: No

Author’s Contribution: *Imran Hossain:* Data Collection, Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis, Drafting, Referencing

Funding: No

Declaration: The author has given consent for the publication.

Competing Interest: No

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