

The Right to Connect as the Right to Learn: Tribal Education and Digital Exclusion**Roshni P K¹, Bhagyasree Menon C²**

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This article looks at the connection between digital access, education, and social justice in India's tribal communities. As education shifts online, having internet access is becoming essential for exercising the right to education. Unfortunately, the digital divide has worsened existing inequalities faced by marginalised groups, especially tribal populations who are still on the edges of India's technological development. The sudden shift to online education, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, has increased the disparities between the tribal population who unable to access the internet and technology to its fullest and those who were able to access the internet and technology as much as they can. In such a way, these kinds of denial or inaccessibility of technology lead these groups into more problems, together with the issues they are facing. As the educational system becomes more focused on online platforms, those who can connect with the internet are denied the opportunity to participate in the educational processes, thereby making the class and hierarchy stronger in its new digital form. By viewing digital access as both an educational and political right, this paper argues that being left out of the digital world is a new form of structural exclusion. Using ideas like the cyber public sphere and digital citizenship, it examines how connectivity affects participation, recognition, and learning in today's digital age. The article concludes that closing the digital gap for tribal communities is not just a technical challenge; it is a democratic necessity linked to the larger fight for equality, representation, and justice.

Keywords: Tribal Education, Digital Divide, Cyber Public Sphere, Marginalisation, Right to Education, Epistemic Justice.

1. Introduction

During this twenty first century, the internet has become a necessity rather than being a luxury. In such a way the right to access internet become an important right in the current scenario. Not only internet the development of different kinds of technologies can be seen together with the advent of internet. Getting access to these technologies and to make them as a part of life become an important right and integral part for exercising the fundamental rights such as freedom of expression, right to education and to participate in the public life and decision-making process especially in case of India as this is a democratic country. India being a land of diversity were here resided different kinds of communities and here exist different kinds of class. When some people got access to internet and related technologies as a piece of cake others are struggling to access internet for fulfilling their basic necessities. One such community who are struggling in such a way are the Indian tribal communities. This struggle becomes more evident and crucial after the Covid-19 pandemic. The major transition that faced by India after the outbreak of Covid 19 was the complete digitalization of government and daily activities. One such important transition was the enhancement of online education. The tribal communities who had no sufficient access to the technology and internet faced more trouble here as they got denial of right to education. In such a way the right to connect to internet began to be understood as right to learn. For the tribal communities of India

where they have to survive the long list of exclusions and denials along with marginalization, the covid 19 pandemic and the digital technology created one more thing into their denial list.

In such a way, this article tries to elaborate upon the issues faced by the tribal communities with the progress of the internet. The study not only focuses on the covid 19 pandemic, right to education and online education, but also tries to point out the kind of exclusion they are facing in the cyber public sphere that limits them from learning the democratic process and policy decisions that are happening in India and losing their chance to be a part of Indian democracy due to this digital divide. In a simple way, the current study tries to expand the dimension of education or learning to the political and communicative process that expands beyond the classrooms.

2. Theoretical Framework: Cyber Public Sphere, Education and Marginalisation

As the dimension of education has been expanded in this study, the link between education, marginalisation, and the online public sphere can be seen through three related ideas: (1) how the public sphere has changed in the digital age; (2) the ongoing social and knowledge-based marginalisation in that sphere; and (3) the new view of education as a process that involves politics and communication beyond just classrooms and into digital spaces. Taken together, these ideas show how being excluded from the digital world keeps old inequalities alive while also creating new chances for democratic involvement and educational fairness.

2.1 Cyber Public Sphere: Jürgen Habermas described the public sphere as a place where citizens can engage in rational debate, shape public opinion, and support democracy. He believed that access to the public sphere was crucial for democratic discussion (Habermas, 1962). However, his model relied on ideals of equality and inclusion that are often absent in divided societies. Feminist and postcolonial scholars, like Nancy Fraser and Chantal Mouffe, have criticized Habermas's vision for ignoring structural exclusions related to class, gender, race, and ethnicity (Mouffe ,2000).

With the growth of the internet, Yochai Benkler claimed that digital technologies have created a networked public sphere, which is a decentralised and participatory communication system. This allows citizens to share, debate, and organize without relying on traditional media gatekeepers. In theory, this new digital setup gives marginalised groups a chance to express themselves and challenge dominant narratives (Benkler, 2006).

Even though the real situation in case of India is not so, the theory tries explain the development of Internet and Cyber Public Sphere as a positive thing. Even though this is a positive thing in its essence the various scenario together with the governmental attitude in India highlights this as partially a negative thing.

Yet, as Zizi Papacharissi points out, the cyber public sphere is not automatically democratic. It mirrors the inequalities present in society. Access to digital spaces is still affected by technology, literacy, and economic resources (Papacharissi ,2015). For tribal communities in India, which have historically been left out of mainstream politics and education, these obstacles mean they remain absent from the digital commons. As a result, digital participation becomes conditional, reinforcing the exclusions that the internet was meant to address (Couldry, 2014).

2.2 Education: While analysing the situation of education on the online platform. The idea of education here not only covers classroom education, it also expands the horizon of education in such a way that political dimensions like access to online information, knowledge about different online platforms and a space to express one's own view about different socio-political and economic scenarios that can be identified as a prerequisite to civic participation in the democratic process. Paulo Freire's idea of critical pedagogy views education as a conversation.

Through this process, those who are oppressed become aware of their social conditions. They gain the ability to change these conditions. Therefore, education is political. It involves a struggle for meaning, recognition, and power (Giroux, 2025). In a simple sense, education can be theorised not only as a means for skill enhancement but also as the foundation for democratic participation. Selwyn and Facer argue that we should view digital education in the context of broader power relations. This perspective highlights who gets access to knowledge, whose knowledge is accepted, and who can effectively participate in public discussions (Selwyn & Facer, 2014).

While considering the situation of tribal communities, there are issues in the access to these online technologies and platforms. As the digital education mainly focuses on the inclusion of dominant languages, mainstream cultures and values and gives priority to urban areas, those people who already have difficulty in accessing the internet become highly excluded from this space and lose their chance to gain knowledge. This kind of omission that has been faced by the marginalised groups and their denied opportunities to create knowledge from their experiences is called as epistemic injustice, which has been explained by Miranda Fricker (Fricker, 2007).

2.3 Marginalisation and the Digital Divide: With the advent of technology, the growth of the digital divide also occurred. In the case of India, the digital divide can be considered as the major issue that has been faced. The condition of digital divide should not be addressed only as a gap in technological access but also as a political and social situation (Gurstein, 2003). It not only includes the lack of physical connectivity but also includes the gaps in cultural importance, language representation and digital literacy. According to Warschauer (2004), true digital inclusion needs meaningful access, which means not just having devices and data but also the skills, content that matters locally and community support.

Lack of internet access shows systemic marginalisation for tribal groups. The shift to digital education during the COVID-19 epidemic highlighted this gap. Many students in remote tribal areas could not access educational materials or participate in online lessons due to poor infrastructure and financial struggles (UNICEF, 2021). The resulting educational loss reflects ongoing historical inequalities in the digital age and should not be seen as a temporary problem. Digital isolation also limits participation in the online public sphere from a political viewpoint. Fraser notes that those who can create counter publics, or spaces where marginalised groups share their identities and challenge dominant narratives, depend on their access to communication channels. These counter publics cannot be heard when connectivity is lost. This situation reinforces control over discourse and representation (Fraser, 2000)

3. The Digital Divide and Tribal Education in India

The internet and digital innovation offer new opportunities for people around the world to engage and share knowledge easily. The likely effects of the digital revolution impact both private lives and public issues, including social, political, and economic data and decisions. Current estimates indicate that approximately 4.66 billion people are online worldwide. This group represents nearly 60% of the world's population. Among them, India's population consist of 54%. Compared to past political, social, and economic changes, internet access and digital innovation represent a unique revolution that has spread rapidly across the globe. Apart from these problems, there have been many issues that different communities in India have faced due to this development. One of the major problems is the digital divide.

On one hand, social groups that are already connected, like wealthy and elite communities, are connecting more and adapting to new technology at a faster rate. On the other hand, populations with historically lower rates of computer and Internet access remain far behind (Digital Divide, <https://cs.stanford.edu>). It is harder to provide digital education to all parts of society, especially indigenous tribes, because of social issues and

infrastructure challenges (Kumar, 2021). Problems such as not having the right equipment or difficulty using the software make this situation worse. Even though technology in education has increased, schools in India and around the world are not fully ready to shift to an online format. Putting everyone online puts a generation's education at risk, as it excludes the most disadvantaged children (ibid).

The major factors that affect the education of tribal students include economic divide, social divide and geographical divide. While elaborating about these divides, each of them contributes differently as a hindrance to the online education of the tribal community.

3.1 Economic divide: The economic situation of the tribal population is very difficult. They mainly depend on farming and forest products, which limits their ability to send children to school (Sahu, 2014). Factors like lack of resources, limited job opportunities, and high poverty rates make this situation worse. Research shows a link between education and household income levels. Poor neighbourhoods, including those where tribes live, lack basic infrastructure compared to wealthier areas. As a result, tribal communities cannot afford the digital devices needed for online education, like smartphones and laptops. This financial struggle worsens the digital divide. It comes from an unequal spread of wealth and income, which affects children from low-income tribal families who cannot buy the devices needed for communication and learning (Diana Sahu, 2020).

3.2 Social Divide: The Tribal community has their own beliefs, customs and traditions which distinguish them from the other communities (Kumar, 2021). The tribal communities, who are already underprivileged and unable to access the internet and technology, also got isolated because of the lack of academic help with the lack of availability of teachers.

3.3 Geographical divide: As the tribal areas are connected with forests and hilly areas, these regions isolate themselves from other modern societies. With this geographical feature, the transport and communication access to these places is naturally low. In this way, the availability of the internet and technology has also become difficult thing. The geography in this way becomes an important step for the exclusion that these tribal communities are facing (ibid). These kinds of problems facing by them are not a simple issue in the case of India, as the tribal population in India constitutes approximately 8.6 % of the total population as according to the 2011 census (Census of India, 2011). Even though different kinds of policies and programmes try to uplift the tribal communities of India, these disparities remain. Different kinds of plans, such as Eklavya Model Residential schools and Tribal sub plan, can be considered as the major plans that have been developed by the Indian government during the rule of various governments. Even though plans like these exist, the situations faced by tribal communities in India are still not in a progressive condition. Different kinds of barriers hinder the progress of tribal development in India. Structural barriers such as poverty, being far away from resources, language challenges, and poor infrastructure continue to be significant obstacles to educational inclusion (Jha & Jhingran, 2005; Nambissan, 2014).

With the advent of the new government in the year 2014, more initiatives in the field of technology and the internet gained importance. One such initiative is the Digital India Initiative developed by the BJP government. The Government of India launched the Digital India initiative in July 2015. Its main goal is to offer digital services to every citizen, improve internet access, and boost the country's digital skills. The "Digital India" initiatives aim to ensure that everyone can access government services online. The key objectives of Digital India are to enhance digital literacy by providing information and services in Indian languages and to connect rural areas with high-speed internet. This program aims to encourage inclusive growth in areas like electronic services, products, manufacturing, and job opportunities (Kumar, 2021).

Even though programmes like these enhanced access to digital services and platforms, the inability to attain these technologies remained an important problem for those who live in forest areas, especially tribal communities. Illiteracy and low education levels have significantly impacted certain groups in India, particularly the Scheduled Tribes (STs). It highlights the interconnection between education, internet access, and digital skills, and emphasises that education is crucial for development and inclusive growth. Although the national literacy rate increased from 52% in 1991 to 74.04% in 2011, Scheduled Tribes (STs) continue to experience higher illiteracy rates and lower enrolment in higher education. Professor Amartya Sen highlighted the importance of education in achieving economic growth that benefits everyone. There are noticeable gender gaps; while literacy among ST women increased from 34.8% in 2001 to nearly 50% in 2011, ST men's literacy went up from 59.2% to 68.5%. Similarly, SC women's literacy improved from 42% to 56.5%, and SC men's literacy rose from 66.6% to 75.2% during the same time (Rama Krishnappa, 2022).

These disparities worsened with the sudden shift to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Reports from UNICEF (2021) and NCERT (2022) show that less than 20% of students in many tribal areas could regularly access digital lessons. Many tribal students in places like Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and Wayanad district in Kerala were excluded because they lacked cell phones, reliable electricity, and consistent internet access (The Hindu, 2021). Digital literacy and costs remained major barriers even in areas with connectivity. (Mehta & Kumar, 2022).

Although e-learning infrastructure has expanded due to government digital initiatives like DIKSHA, PM eVidya, and SWAYAM, its impact on tribal students has been minimal. Their inclusivity has been limited by language barriers, culturally unfamiliar courses, and the assumption of universal digital skills (Gurumurthy & Bharthur, 2019). As a result, digital education often reproduces the same hierarchies found in traditional education. This leads to what Rangaswamy and Arora (2016) call a "digital caste system," where access to technology determines access to knowledge.

The democratic ideal of education as a public good is significantly impacted by digital marginalisation. People who are excluded from the digital world lose their right to education and miss the chance to participate in the larger online community when remote learning becomes the norm. Closing this gap requires more than just building more infrastructure; it also needs language inclusivity, digital fairness, and teaching methods that respect indigenous knowledge (Fricker, 2007; Gurumurthy & Chami, 2016). Without these measures, the promise of digital education may become another form of marginalisation instead of empowerment.

4. The Right to Connect as the Right to Learn: The Politics of Digital Exclusion

In modern India, internet access is essential for education and democratic participation. People's ability to learn, communicate, and engage in public life depends on their connectivity. Therefore, the right to connect is becoming more linked to the rights to education and participation, which are vital for a healthy democracy. However, there are significant social and political gaps in the digital landscape. Being excluded from digital resources means being left out of civic and educational opportunities for many of India's indigenous and marginalised communities. Even though there has been a great development in the field still the marginalised communities, such as tribal groups, face issues in accessing technology and the internet.

Along with the issues they have already been facing, the COVID-19 pandemic created disastrous implications. During the pandemic, education moved online, highlighting serious inequalities, especially in tribal areas. In Jhabua district, Madhya Pradesh, the lack of smartphones and internet access forced children to leave formal education and return to work on farms and construction sites (Meliwar, 2021). Similarly, students from the

Gujjar-Bakerwal community in Kashmir had to focus on work instead of school to help their families. Ongoing internet issues, like slow speeds and shutdowns, made these problems worse, as online classes usually need stable 4G connectivity. As a result, both teachers and students found it hard to access educational resources effectively (Rajratnam & Yadav, 2021).

In Dumbi village, Jharkhand, many Scheduled Tribe (ST) families depend on daily wage jobs. The pandemic made educational challenges worse due to school closures and widespread poverty. Many families cannot afford smartphones, laptops, or data packages. A lack of knowledge about e-learning has deepened the digital divide (Kumar, 2021). The Expert Committee on Tribal Health reported that ST populations have a life expectancy that is 3.1 years lower than the general population. This gap is worse because of a preference for alternative medicine and a lack of healthcare resources in tribal areas (Negi & Abdul, 2021).

Despite suggestions from the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) to improve access to technology and healthcare education, progress is still lacking, especially after the pandemic (Dore, 2021). The rollout of COVID-19 vaccines exposed major obstacles for disadvantaged groups in rural regions. These include poor internet access and language barriers, as the CoWIN platform was initially only in English. Vaccination rates among tribal populations are very low. By late October 2021, 63% of districts with ST populations performed below the national average of 53% for vaccinations (Esteves & Iqbal, 2021). Vaccine hesitancy, driven by misinformation, added to the difficulties of raising immunisation rates.

The digital divide comes from both demand-side issues, such as a lack of digital literacy, and supply-side problems, like the limited availability of ICTs. Research shows that differences in people's resources, access, skills, and use of ICTs create significant inequalities in digital access (Bathran & Ralph, 2016). For Scheduled Tribes (STs), access to the internet and digital technologies is very limited. This issue is made worse by the government's difficulty in providing basic services like electricity and healthcare. The 2011 Census indicates that only 51% of ST households had electricity. There is little detailed data on digital infrastructure in tribal areas. Hence, this analysis focuses on the connection between the ST population, urban-rural demographics, and state distribution. The percentage of ST individuals in urban areas is just 2.4% (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, 2001), which shows the significant impact of the urban-rural divide on STs. Internet infrastructure development in India has lagged due to low priority for rural network deployment, limited ISP investments, and the lack of local spectrum licensing for micro-entrepreneurs (Kumar et al., 2022). States with large ST populations, such as Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, and Rajasthan, have faced challenges in improving their internet service readiness. This is evident in the state internet readiness index from the Internet & Mobile Association of India (IAMAI). The rankings show Jharkhand at 19th, Madhya Pradesh at 18th, Chhattisgarh at 17th, Odisha at 15th, and Rajasthan at 13th. Gujarat is the only state with a high ST population scoring above 0.70, ranking 6th. Overall, these factors contribute to the ongoing digital exclusion of ST communities.

In India, various Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities face serious challenges in accessing modern technologies. Low literacy rates can drop below 30% in historically disadvantaged areas (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2020). The National Health Survey (2015-16) shows that half of the ST population is in the lowest wealth bracket. The Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (GMPI) highlights that five out of six individuals living in poverty come from disadvantaged tribes and castes. STs experience the highest poverty level at 50.6% (Bhat, 2021). To tackle these critical demand-side issues, we need a comprehensive approach that focuses on employment, education, and digital training opportunities. The digital divide worsens due to a lack of understanding of the digital ecosystem (Aggarwal, 2019). The benefits of using digital technology are much greater for those with several years of education (Ahamed & Siddiqui, 2020). An analysis of NSS data from 2017-2018 reveals that STs have the lowest

digital literacy at the household level, at just 21%, which is much lower than the rates in other social groups. Interestingly, while 54% of digitally literate ST households are in urban areas, only 15% of their rural counterparts show similar literacy.

The political implications of digital access and the concept of the digital divide highlight it as an issue of social privilege, not just a technological concern (Gurumurthy and Chami, 2016). It criticises government initiatives like Digital India for failing to meet the needs of marginalised learners, which keeps a "digital caste system" in place. As a result, tribal and rural learners experience both educational exclusion and a lack of participation in democratic processes, making them politically invisible in a society that relies on digital platforms for governance and civic engagement (Rangaswamy and Arora, 2016).

The text stresses the need to view connectivity as a fundamental right tied to educational and civic participation. It argues that connectivity should be treated as a public right, not a commodity. It calls for policies that not only provide access to digital devices and networks but also enhance digital literacy, support local language content, and promote culturally relevant education. The idea of epistemic injustice is introduced, highlighting the importance of including marginalised voices in knowledge creation (Fricker, 2007). At last, closing the digital divide is presented as a necessity for democracy, ensuring that Indian society remains participatory and diverse. The rights to learn, to be heard, and to connect are essential parts of a healthy democracy.

5. Reimagining the Cyber Public Sphere for Educational Justice

The growth of the online public sphere has transformed how people participate in democracy, communicate, and learn. Social media platforms, online learning environments, and open-access forums were initially seen as fair spaces that could broaden access to knowledge and information. However, the experiences of India's tribal and marginalised groups reveal that these areas often mirror and sometimes worsen existing social and educational gaps. To achieve real educational fairness, we must view the cyber public sphere as a contested political space influenced by privilege, power, and access rather than as a neutral platform.

Digital technologies were expected to encourage open discussion and participatory communication, based on Jürgen Habermas's idea of the public sphere (Habermas, 1962). However, the situation in India reveals how unequal digital participation really is. According to Gurumurthy and Chami, structural issues that limit access to education, such as poverty, caste, gender discrimination, and geographic isolation, also determine who gets involved and who remains unseen in online discussions. Many tribal learners face two main forms of digital exclusion: the denial of their right to share their realities, languages, and experiences in digital and educational conversations, and a lack of internet access (Gurumurthy and Chami, 2016).

Access to technology alone is not enough to achieve educational fairness in the digital age. It must focus on cultural and knowledge inclusivity. Education for marginalised groups should connect with their lived experiences and knowledge systems. It shouldn't just fit them into existing frameworks, according to Nambisan. Reimagining the cyber public sphere means creating digital spaces where diverse voices can coexist, challenge each other, and create knowledge together instead of just being passive consumers (Nambisan, 2014).

This requires a shift from the idea of a single, universal digital public space to what Chantal Mouffe calls agonistic pluralism. This democratic model highlights the importance of plurality, diversity, and disagreement. Within this framework, digital participation and education turn into places where marginalised communities can share their concerns, challenge dominant narratives, and regain representation. In practical terms, this means

backing digital literacy projects that are sensitive to different cultures and languages, encouraging content creation by the community, and ensuring government regulations that protect inclusive online involvement (Mouffe, 2013).

The data systems that support the online public sphere are not neutral. They reflect political and economic interests that affect visibility and voice, as Couldry and Mejias (2019) argue. Educational platforms and algorithms often push aside alternative knowledge systems, favouring content from prestigious universities and major languages. This results in a digital hierarchy that marginalises the identities of tribal and rural learners. Rethinking educational fairness also means looking at how platform management, data, and algorithms influence who gets seen and heard in digital spaces.

According to this viewpoint, communicative justice and educational justice are closely connected. Redistributing communicative power, which means giving communities the ability to connect and the freedom to create and share knowledge, is necessary to ensure equal participation in the online public sphere. Initiatives like locally relevant educational content, open-source multilingual platforms, and community-led digital learning centres can act as transformative actions. They shift the nature of the online public space from one of consumption to one of collaboration (Couldry and Mejias, 2019).

It is ultimately a democratic effort to rethink the online environment for educational justice. This requires recognising that access to digital learning means access to participation, voice, and representation. The digital space moves closer to its promise of liberation, where equality, dissent, and education can coexist when marginalised groups are allowed to learn and communicate on their own terms.

6. Conclusion

In the twenty-first century, education, technology, and democracy are closely connected. The right to learn is tied to the right to connect and participate. In India, the digital divide reveals existing social inequalities, making access to connectivity essential for inclusion. The lack of digital infrastructure in tribal and marginalized communities shows not just a technical flaw but a deeper problem of inequality and neglect. Moving education to online platforms without fair access results in digital exclusion rather than empowerment.

The growth of tribal communities faces several challenges. These include limited access to basic services, economic empowerment, healthcare, education, and social inclusion. Traditional development methods have had some successes, but using digital technology offers a strong opportunity to tackle these problems. To successfully implement digital initiatives in tribal areas, we need supportive policies and governance that emphasize inclusivity, sustainability, and accessibility. A key part of this is improving digital awareness to close the urban-rural gap. Many tribal communities currently have limited access to information and technology, which creates a digital divide. Policies should focus on providing the necessary technological infrastructure and promoting digital literacy in these communities. Customized education programs aimed at tribal youth and adults can equip them with important skills. This training can help them use digital tools to access health information, government programs, online education, and market opportunities for local products.

Achieving educational fairness goes beyond just expanding technology. It requires rethinking the digital public sphere to not only provide information but also encourage participation and amplify the voices of marginalised groups. For true inclusion, tribal learners need access to culturally relevant materials, linguistic diversity, and acknowledgement of indigenous knowledge systems. Policies should recognise digital access as a public right instead of a privilege tied to the market.

Rethinking the digital public sphere for educational fairness is fundamentally a democratic task. It aims to disrupt centralised communicative power and push for a fair distribution of voice in the digital realm. When marginalised communities gain both access and the ability to learn, express, and dissent, the digital space can begin to reach its transformative potential. Therefore, bridging the digital divide is about more than just connecting devices; it involves linking individuals to democratic processes.

Ultimately, the right to connect turns into the right to learn, to be heard, and to feel a sense of belonging. The digital environment must welcome the diverse voices of India—urban and tribal, dominant and marginalized—so that it can grow into a truly participatory space that respects equality, fairness, and democratic inclusion.

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