

Exploring the Implications of the Digital Divide in India on Political Engagement Among Different Socio-Economic Groups

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ABSTRACT

The digital divide in India significantly impacts political engagement among different socio-economic groups. As India rapidly digitizes, disparities in internet access, digital literacy, and affordability shape the extent to which citizens participate in the political process. This research examines how the digital divide affects political awareness, engagement, and participation among India's urban and rural populations, as well as across income, caste, and gender divides. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study explores the extent to which marginalized communities are excluded from digital political discourse, the effectiveness of online political campaigns, and the role of digital literacy in shaping political outcomes. The findings underscore that while digital platforms enhance engagement for privileged groups, they reinforce existing inequalities for lower socio-economic strata. The paper concludes with recommendations for bridging the digital divide to create a more inclusive political landscape in India.

Keyword : Digital Divide, Political Engagement, Socio-economic Inequality, Marginalized Communities, Digital Access, Rural Citizens, Dalits, Women, Digital Literacy, Policy Interventions, Civil Society, Inclusive Democracy, Digital Infrastructure, Digital Empowerment, Political Participation, Gender Gap, India

1. INTRODUCTION

Digital technology penetration throughout India has brought major changes to political involvement by making politics more accessible while boosting its dynamic nature and increasing user engagement. Every socio-economic group does not share equal advantages from this transitional period. The digital divide generates political access problems because it separates people who possess digital capabilities from those who do not.

Urban people together with higher-income families enjoy better access to political information through online campaigns alongside digital governance services but these benefits refrain from reaching rural populations because they lack digital comprehension ability and face restricted internet access along with reduced financial capacity. Such inequalities produce political inequality that prevents digitally disadvantaged groups from gaining enough representation in political conversations.

This research investigates how the digital divide affects political engagement throughout India by responding to main study questions.

- What influence does the digital divide create on the political engagement processes in modern-day India?
 - What prevents these socioeconomic minority groups from actively participating in digital political affairs?
- iii. Medical systems and public sector officials have executed what strategies to solve the digital inclusion problems.
- iv. What action plans exist to eliminate digital gaps which guarantee political inclusion?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: DIGITAL DIVIDE AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

2.1 Understanding the Digital Divide

The digital divide creates multiple layers of separation that determine which four categories hold different economic positions gain access to digital technology benefits in the present day. Diverse social and educational elements together with economic status and geographic locations create significant variations during group interactions with digital platforms.

Political access through digital means depends on the digital divide because it defines which groups get to see political information and participate in digital dialogue and use digital platforms for influencing decisions. Internet penetration rates in India improved during the last ten years although digital tool availability remains inconsistent among urban and rural populations and various socio-economic segments along with gender and caste groupings. This part investigates the three fundamental components of the digital divide which include access divide and usage divide and impact divide to identify their effects on political engagement in India.

2.1.1 THE ACCESS DIVIDE: THE GAP IN PHYSICAL ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY

Physical access to digital technologies represented by smartphones and computers together with high-speed internet faces basic inequality known as the access divide. This form of the digital divide establishes whether people have the ability to access the digital realm.

Factors Contributing to the Access Divide in India

- The cost of smartphones together with data plans and computers prevents underprivileged groups from acquiring access. Marginalized communities who live in rural areas maintain poor access to outdated digital technology through sharing devices because their limited resources prevent them from purchasing high-speed broadband and multiple devices just like urban elite groups do.
- Indian rural areas have statistically less internet penetration compared to urban regions based on data from the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI). The internet reaches only 37 percent of rural Indians while urban areas achieve 72 percent usage rates. The lack of digital access prevents rural communities from participating in political activities because digital campaigns and e-governance elements and online activism remain unavailable to them.
- Moreover the basic digital infrastructure which consists of fiber-optic connectivity extends to mobile network coverage with stable electricity supply remains absent from many remote villages obstructing digital access for the population. Digital engagement exists only as an advantage reserved for citizens living in urban areas since they lack the required fundamental infrastructure.
- The presence of socio-cultural norms restricts women who live in rural areas from accessing digital devices. Women face substantially limited political online engagement because they have lower rates of mobile phone and internet access.

Impact of the Access Divide on Political Engagement

Any voter who lacks access to digital platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp becomes cut off from political campaigns conducted through these channels.

The rural public along with low-income voters stay reliant on controlled broadcast media since they lack access to independent Internet news sources that could present unprejudiced political information.

Rural populations cannot take advantage of government initiatives MyGov and e-Gram Swaraj through e-governance platforms because they lack basic access.

2.1.2 THE USAGE DIVIDE: DIFFERENCES IN DIGITAL SKILLS AND LITERACY

Digital literacy together with technology skills and the effective use of digital tools generates the usage divide that separates people from one another. People who physically hold internet access along with digital devices do not

always have sufficient capability and self-assurance for appropriate political engagement or information acquisition or digital activism.

Factors Contributing to the Usage Divide

- Many rural residents together with lower-income individuals experience difficulty mastering fundamental digital learning abilities like website navigation and authentic political news detection when urban technophiles excel at social media platforms and internet explorers and news platform usage.
- The digital political content primarily exists in English or Hindi thus preventing speakers of different languages from accessing it. Indigenous groups together with speakers of regional languages encounter restricted materials written in their mother tongues which hinders their online political engagement.
- The Indian schools demonstrate extreme segregation based on educational attainment. Digital tool proficiency tends to increase among individuals who acquired education in cities and towns as compared to less educated underprivileged citizens who received limited formal schooling.
- Older people residing in rural regions face challenges when adopting technological devices so they continue to use traditional media platforms for accessing political news.

Impact of the Usage Divide on Political Engagement

Doubtful individuals with low digital competency levels tend to accept deceptive news reports that expose them to political propaganda tools and digital misinformation along with impostor content.

Digitally illiterate individuals face challenges interacting with political institutions since they must use websites, fill out forms and complete online identity verification procedures.

The insufficient digital skills of marginalized communities blocks their involvement in Twitter and YouTube and WhatsApp-based political engagements.

2.1.3 The Impact Divide describes political power disparities that emerge because of digital communication methods

The impact divide establishes the final phase of digital inequality because it shows how various socio-economic groups win from their use of digital political activities. The study shows that digital access distribution generates different results regarding real-world political influence as well as representation along with activism levels.

Factors Contributing to the Impact Divide

- People from upper-caste backgrounds along with urban dwellers successfully use digital tools for policy advocacy yet lower-income populations face obstacles preventing them from making impactful uses of such platforms.
- II. The social media algorithms display more content from influential politicians alongside celebrities while blocking visibility to less-wealthy underprivileged groups in society.
- III. People with digital resources continue ideological debates on the internet to strengthen their political identity positions yet individuals who lack internet access remain disconnected from crucial dialogues.
- IV. Digital security programs combined with censorship and internet harassment practices disproportionately affect minority groups which discourages them from participating in politics.

Impact of the Impact Divide on Political Engagement

The privileged section of society controls digital spaces through their dominance which limits representation of Dalits and Adivasis as well as lower-income voters in digital policymaking processes.

The digital-based political movements of #MeToo and #CAAProtests reached widespread adoption yet rural residents together with low-income people remain unable to participate in comparable forms of activism because they do not have sufficient online access or digital literacy.

Businesses holding strong digital presence possess superior influence to implement policies in government compared to grassroots activists who maintain lesser online reach.

2.1.4 THE INTERCONNECTION BETWEEN THE THREE DIVIDES

The three divides function as parts of a system which collectively generate greater disadvantages against marginalized communities. People who lack digital connectivity fail to develop digital abilities while persons with limited digital competency struggle to activate politics through online means. Lower-income and rural inhabitants together with marginalized groups form an exclusion cycle that prevents them from participating in digital political engagement.

For example:

A Dalit woman living in a rural location faces three barriers against digital political engagement because she does not have smartphone access (access divide), struggles with digital user skills (usage divide) and gets ignored by digital political activism (impact divide).

The combination of internet speed and strong digital skills and active online political participation enables urban men from upper-caste backgrounds who receive college education to accumulate political influence.

The three dimensions of the digital divide enable policymakers and academics together with activists to develop approaches for closing digital inequality gaps and achieving political inclusion for all Indian socio-economic groups.

2.2 The Role of Digital Technology in Political Engagement

The current digital age features political engagement through these activities.

The digital landscape provides full-time access for citizens to obtain political news besides political debates and policy information. The digital age allows citizens to take part in virtual political discussions through petition signing and virtual protest activities. Public services and E-Governance mechanisms enable governments to create efficient systems which strengthen their communication with citizens for service delivery.

2.3 Resource Mobilization and Political Efficacy

People with high resource levels such as education or technology or financial backing tend to become involved in political activities according to the resource mobilization theory. According to political efficacy theory digital access enables users to develop confidence regarding their ability to promote political changes.

3. DIGITAL DIVIDE IN INDIA: AN OVERVIEW

The digital gap in India represents a fundamental socio-economic hurdle which blocks people from various social groups from experiencing political activism and economic prospects and social advancement. The digital infrastructure and literacy gap as well as opportunities for online political engagement persist at unequal levels between different social and economic categories of Indian citizens.

Government initiatives under Digital India and BharatNet together with enlargement of mobile internet services have revolutionized India's digital environment during the previous ten years. The advantages of government programs do not achieve consistent distribution thus maintaining urban-rural and gender and caste and educational attainment and income-based differences in digital service availability. The existing digital penetration levels of India are analyzed according to internet availability and user training capabilities and voter participation rates in this section.

3.1 Internet Penetration and Digital Literacy in India

The population of Indian internet users stands as the world's second biggest behind China since 850 million individuals effectively use internet services during 2023. These statistics obscure extensive differences regarding who uses internet services and digital tools as well as which groups benefit from participating with digital platforms.

3.1.1 Urban-Rural Divide in Digital Access

The digital penetration distribution throughout India strongly depends on the urban-rural distinction. The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) reports that 72% of urban population uses the internet but this figure drops to 37% among rural residents in 2023.

Reasons for the Rural Digital Divide

- i. **Lack of Digital Infrastructure :** Basic fiber-optic broadband along with stable mobile networks and electricity does not exist in several rural locations because these services remain unreliable. Limited private sector investment in rural digital infrastructure due to low commercial viability. The rural development project BharatNet faces implementation delays while facing government execution obstacles.
- ii. **Affordability Constraints :** Rural families experience limited financial capacity since they cannot afford to purchase smartphones together with data plans or internet equipment. The pricing advantage of mobile internet in India over other countries does not ease the financial obstacle that prevents rural families from buying digital devices.
- iii. **Lack of Digital Literacy :** Residents in rural areas who belong to underprivileged groups together with the elderly find it difficult to learn digital platform operations which results in slow adoption of digital systems. Schools in rural areas commonly experience two challenges: they have insufficient computers together with no internet access that restricts digital education.
- iv. **Cultural and Social Barriers :** A preference for traditional forms of media (such as television and radio) over digital content. Most rural residents view digital governance along with political participation online as intimidating which leads to decreased digital political participation rates. Political Implications of the Urban-Rural Digital Divide. The restricted availability of digital political materials and political discussions leads to reduced contact between rural residents and various political viewpoints. Large numbers of rural residents cannot access government services that have migrated to online platforms through Aadhaar updates or voting awareness platforms and grievances systems. The focus of political parties on online dealing with social media reduces rural constituents' opportunities to learn about political matters.

3.1.2 Gender Gap in Digital Access - Social values that hinder women from obtaining technological access in India create a digital distinction between genders in the country. Forty-five percent fewer female Indian users access the internet compared to male users based on Mobile Gender Gap Initiative data from 2023.

Reasons for the Gender Digital Gap

i. Cultural Restrictions on Women's Technology Use

The use of mobile phones and internet access remains forbidden for various women since their families consider these tools expose them to inappropriate content or predatory relationships.

Patriarchal social norms found in particular rural regions prevent women from using social media thereby obstructing their ability to take part in digital political dialogues.

ii. Economic Barriers

Women who belong to rural areas and low-income homes face barriers to smartphone purchase and internet data transaction because of lower economic power.

iii. Safety and Online Harassment

Online harassment and trolling against women occur at greater intensities which leads them to avoid participating in digital political activities.

Political deception campaigns using deepfakes targeted at female politicians together with fake information work as powerful discouraging mechanisms that prevent women from becoming politically active.

Political Implications of the Gender Digital Divide

The reduced digital political involvement results from women being excluded from online voting campaigns and e-governance platforms and digital activism systems.

Women face limited participation in digital governance because they have restricted access to political debates and live-streamed parliamentary sessions along with e-petition platforms.

3.1.3 Education and Income Divide in Digital Access

The digital resource gap in India exists mainly because higher-income groups alongside more educated individuals obtain greater accessibility to digital infrastructure.

Digital Disparities Based on Education Level

University-educated people use digital platforms with high frequency to perform political research along with submitting e-petitions and accessing government services.

Individuals who have limited education experience more difficulty detecting false news and misleading information and propaganda because they do not possess strong digital literacy abilities.

Income-Based Digital Inequalities

Those with high incomes retain the ability to buy various devices they need along with high-speed internet access as well as technical training.

People living in low-income situations confront difficulties accessing the internet collectively and experience unstable mobile connections as well as out-of-date technology which restricts their participation in online political discussions.

3.2 Political Digital Engagement in India

The digital revolution made political involvement stronger because citizens now have access to political updates as well as opportunities to argue about policies and start digital protest movements. The digital political engagement system faces inequality because of the digital divide.

3.2.1 The Role of Social Media in Political Mobilization

Facebook along with Twitter and WhatsApp have revolutionized political media distribution within India.

Social media platforms regulate political participation through multiple routes by both politicians and voters.

i. Political Awareness and Mobilization : Facebook and Twitter enable political parties to deliver their campaign messages through which they gain voters and advance their ideologies.

Social media hashtags such as #FarmersProtest and #MeToo alongside #CAAProtests motivate numerous people to participate in social and political movement mobilization.

- ii. **WhatsApp as a Political Tool** : The extensive user base of 400 million WhatsApp users in India makes this platform essential for political messaging functions and campaign network management and distribution of false news content.
- iii. **Challenges of Social Media Engagement** : Political organizations distribute false information together with biased material with the purpose of manipulating what voters believe.

Political opposition groups together with activists encounter limitations on their digital use because governments practice surveillance and enforce censorship.

3.2.2 E-Governance and Digital Political Participation

E-governance platforms serve as government initiatives to increase citizen engagement according to the Indian government.

Key E-Governance Platforms

- i. Through MyGov citizens and the government maintain a direct communication channel where they can participate in surveys and public consultations.
- ii. Through its application UMANG users can obtain more than 1000 public services while making Aadhaar updates and filing their taxes.
- iii. **E-Gram Swaraj**: A digital initiative for rural development planning.

Barriers to Digital Governance Participation

Several citizens face challenges when using e-governance systems due to their insufficient digital literacy. Most public websites function primarily in English and Hindi while neglecting those who speak regional languages.

3.2.3 Online Voting Awareness Campaigns

The Election Commission of India (ECI) enhances voter turnout through digital awareness campaigns that are intended to boost participation.

Key Digital Voter Awareness Initiatives : Residents can use the Voter Helpline App to perform two functions which include voting registration and obtaining information about their designated polling stations. Social Media platforms receive Election Commission campaigns which target modern voters through Instagram and YouTube and Twitter networks. Limitations of Digital Voter Awareness Initiatives

Internet users form an unbalanced portion of voters since they belong to urban areas. The population of older adults and people living in rural regions continues to depend on traditional voter awareness initiatives presented offline.

4. IMPLICATIONS OF THE DIGITAL DIVIDE ON POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

The digital disparity in India generates long-lasting effects which affect political involvement and causes divergences regarding political information access and digital activism abilities and participation in digital policy dialogs and e-governance interactions. Digital politics tend to favor persons from advantaged backgrounds who own the capabilities needed for political engagement but marginal groups struggle to maintain representation because of unequal access and literacy skills affordability.

People who engage politically in the digital age become part of online discussions and social media activism and use e-governance systems to vote digitally and advocate for policies. The ability of rural communities together with lower-income groups as well as Dalits and Adivasis and women is restricted through structural barriers from effectively using digital platforms for political empowerment.

The digital divide manifests differently in rural-urban areas and based on income level and caste background and between men and women respectively.

4.1 The Rural-Urban Disparity in Digital Political Engagement

Political equality in India faces major obstacles because of the strong gap in digital access between rural and urban areas. The difference between urban and rural areas in India results in better internet access for city people but rural citizens must use traditional media platforms that restrict their chance to participate in active political debates.

4.1.1 Rural Dependence on Traditional Media

Rural populations participate in traditional media rather than digital platforms because they interact with one-way broadcasts instead of online political debates and live-streamed political events that urban voters use.

Rural areas gain mass political outreach using television and radio yet these traditional platforms make it difficult to verify information and reach a wide range of political viewpoints which results in limited political awareness.

4.1.2 Lower Exposure to Digital Political Campaigns

Political parties deploy Facebook and WhatsApp platforms together with Twitter pages and YouTube channels to do political campaigning as well as reaching out to voters to discuss policies.

People in rural areas who lack internet access cannot receive real-time political developments or take part in online petitions or digital demonstrations or develop direct political relationships with leaders.

Rural voters remain cut off from vital political information which results in an information gap that allows urban voters to stay better aware of policies and governance matters.

4.1.3 Exclusion from Digital Governance and Government Schemes

Indian authorities established MyGov alongside Digital India and e-Gram Swaraj as part of their e-governance service development initiatives.

Many villagers cannot benefit from government welfare schemes, grievance redressal systems and policy consultations because they lack digital skills together with inadequate internet infrastructure.

Digital access denial estranges rural communities from bureaucratic intermediaries who create corruption opportunities that delay the receipt of government benefits.

Political Consequences of the Rural-Urban Digital Divide

The gap between urban and rural voters exists because urban people display superior digital engagement compared to those living in rural areas.

Rural people receive limited political representation through digital discussions together with policy creation and digital activism practices.

The obstacle of digital governance prevents rural citizens from participating in online public services.

The rural-urban digital gap requires immediate attention because it allows rural people to join digital political discussions and use e-governance services and policy-making opportunities.

4.2 Income-Based Digital Disparities and Political Engagement

Digital access and political engagement get strongly influenced by the level of economic inequality that exists in a society. Heavily privileged groups continuously interact with political news through digital platforms and engage in e-governance systems but most disadvantaged groups fail to access digital political debates because their limited funds prevent them from using digital platforms.

4.2.1 Affordability Barriers for Low-Income Groups

Millions of low-income families struggle to purchase smartphones together with internet data plans and digital devices because such technology remains unaffordable.

The Internet Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) presented discovery in 2023 showing that low-income groups achieve only a 42% smartphone ownership rate as high-income groups reach 78% ownership.

Real-time political information along with policy discussions and voter awareness campaigns become unavailable because of this restriction.

4.2.2 Digital Literacy and Misinformation Risks

People living in low-income areas show less proficiency in digital media which exposes them to misleading information distributed through fake news and political propaganda.

The unverified material people of limited means obtain through WhatsApp forwards and social media rumblings skews their political ideas and affects which candidates they vote for.

4.2.3 Limited Participation in Online Policy Discussions

People with higher income tend to use their digital abilities to participate in online policy consultations and e-governance platforms and political forums. Economically weaker sections encounter challenges when trying to participate in online governance systems and digital activism and petitions activities. Higher-income citizens who lack representation in digital discourse create policies which predominantly serve elite urban communities.

Political Consequences of Income-Based Digital Inequalities

Higher-income groups make up most of the digital population who engage in political activities because of digital elitism. Social marginalization impacts economically disadvantaged groups who remain restricted from joining online political affairs and digital activism and policy development initiatives. Governance policies created without proper low-income representation frequently disregard their population needs because these groups have reduced influence during political decision-making.

4.3 Caste and Digital Political Participation

Digital disparities due to caste in India dramatically shape the representation and political communications while suppressing digital activist efforts in the country. Digital power structures operate primarily in favor of upper-class groups to exclude Dalits, Adivasis and minority communities from their rights of political expression and involvement.

4.3.1 Upper-Caste Dominance in Digital Political Spaces

Digital activities and political journalism as well as online communication predominantly serve Savarna upper castes while preventing Dalits and Adivasis from being adequately represented. The social networks and digital elite groups of higher caste activists block lower caste activists from achieving online attention.

4.3.2 Dalit and Adivasi Exclusion from Digital Activism

Little access to digital devices hinders members of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes from taking part in digital political activities such as discussions and campaigns and demonstrations. The practice of online caste-based discrimination causes Dalits to stay away from participating in mainstream political conversations.

4.3.3 E-Governance Bias and Digital Discrimination

Lower-caste groups experience social exclusion because government digital services fail to make themselves accessible to them.

The dominant policymaking processes online mainly function through elite groups who neglect important concerns of Dalits and Adivasis clients.

Political Consequences of Caste-Based Digital Inequalities

- Limited representation of Dalits and Adivasis in online policymaking and governance.
- Increased caste-based misinformation and hate speech on digital platforms.

Digital political talks fail to represent lower-caste people because their voices get marginalized.

4.4 Gender Digital Divide and Women's Political Engagement

Digital barriers and limitations at both the access level and e-governance participation stage prevent women from India from fully engaging politically which aggravates pre-existing gaps between men and women in political activity.

4.4.1 Limited Internet Access for Women

Internet usage stands at 35% among women in India whereas men have a usage rate of 55%. Family traditions together with cultural traditions block many women from using digital equipment. Women who lack digital access experience diminished possibilities to participate in essential political discussions and governance matters.

4.4.2 Online Harassment and Misinformation Against Women

Female political figures along with female activists experience worse online abuse through trolls and cyberbullying and harassing activities. The promotion of false information discourages female leaders from using digital political interfaces. Women reduce their participation in political discussions because they fear being victims of cyberstalking and suffering from online abuse.

4.4.3 Barriers to Women's Engagement in E-Governance

Government digital platforms do not provide interfaces that are friendly to women and do not offer support for women who are not familiar with technology. The digital skills shortage among female populations blocks their ability to take advantage of digital welfare programs.

Political Consequences of the Gender Digital Divide

- Low digital participation limits women's political empowerment and representation.

Online discrimination toward women prevents their advancement toward political leadership positions. Women lose their ability to connect with policymaking through digital governance sites which results in decreased political involvement.

The digital divide within India leads to aristocratic political disparities while it keeps marginalized groups out of digital democracy and beyond underrepresentation. The essential task lies in solving these disparities in order to

create inclusive governance alongside equal political information access for every socio-economic group in digital political participation processes.

5. DIGITAL POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS: WHO BENEFITS?

Digital technology has reshaped Indian political campaigns because it allows delivery of voter outreach through social media platforms alongside online ads and mobile apps. Digital formats have replaced earlier voting methods including traditional printed advertisements because mobile internet technology and smartphones now dominate our culture.

Digital political campaigns produce unequal positive effects for various sections of society and everyone equally does not receive similar advantages. Individuals who receive education in urban areas use political information online yet individuals from rural areas together with low socioeconomic backgrounds remain dependent on traditional radio and television content. The current modern political activism occurs digitally though traditional offline connections remain fundamental for older adults to acquire political content.

The digital gap stops marginalized voters from receiving political services from BJP and INC because these groups have no access and limited electronic literacy together with insufficient financial resources to obtain digital content. The segment analyzes both the groups that would benefit from decentralized election approaches and examines why Indian voters find digital campaign materials difficult to obtain.

5.1 Urban, Educated Elites Engage More Actively with Digital Political Content

Indian political campaigns deliver their greatest benefits to individuals from upper-income groups who reside in urban areas and possess advanced education because these demographic sectors have superior access to digital devices and high-speed internet and social media platforms.

5.1.1 Higher Digital Literacy and Political Awareness

Because they master digital skills urban elites develop analytical capabilities which lets them review political content in depth participate in social dialogues online and confirm news facts. Individuals with education background tend to make voting decisions relying on search engines together with political analysis websites and social media platforms for debates. These urban elites use Twitter and Facebook together with YouTube to broadcast their political messages and bolster their activism.

5.1.2 Access to Multiple Digital Platforms

Urban elite citizens consume political material and distribute it using Facebook alongside Twitter through Instagram and YouTube while depending on WhatsApp and Telegram. Through digital platforms urban elite members obtain immediate access to political speeches and live election debates and real-time news material that facilitates their involvement in political discourse. Politicians together with policymakers design their digital outreach primarily for urban listeners while maintaining digital elitism through their approaches.

5.1.3 Influence on Political Decision-Making

Social media users living in urban areas guide national political stories through their media coverage which also directs policy formation. The political influence initiated through social media trends and online petitions created by elite urban participants tends to receive media recognition and attract governmental support. Political parties use digital campaign strategies to attract professionals together with students along with influencers which enhances their electoral power.

Political Consequences of Digital Elitism

Digital political participation creates policy debates that exclude rural voices because urban dwellers dominate digital public discourse. System-directed content formats choose to distribute information primarily toward English-speaking people with high incomes thus leaving behind speakers of regional languages and voters from lower-

income demographics. Twitter Facebook and YouTube feature political leadership from the elite class which strengthens their position of power in digital political realms. Digital platforms help urban elite populations to participate in democracy but they create larger gaps between the digital opportunities of upper class citizens versus disadvantaged groups.

5.2 Rural and Low-Income Populations Remain Reliant on Traditional Media

The fast-growing digital sector of India has not eliminated the practice of rural inhabitants and economically disadvantaged people getting their political news from television stations alongside radio and newspaper outlets. Economic disadvantages together with the digital gap between towns and countryside prevent residents from participating in digital political communications.

5.2.1 Limited Internet Penetration in Rural Areas

We observe that internet access exists exclusively in the lives of 37% of rural Indians although 72% of urban Indians demonstrate this capability. Poor network coverage, high data costs, and unreliable electricity supply limit digital participation in rural areas. Digital political campaigning by parties results in limited contact with offline rural voters because they remain off the internet network.

5.2.2 Dependence on Television and Print Media

Rural voters specifically use television broadcasts and radio programs to receive election news because these channels offer affordable content which they can understand without difficulty. The local newspapers alongside state-controlled Doordarshan news channels function as main sources of political information throughout villages. The digital orientation of political leadership separates urban from rural voters because it selects digital over traditional field-based community engagement programs.

5.2.3 Economic Barriers to Digital Political Participation

The cost of smartphones and mobile data plans exceeds the budget of low-income families which eliminates their ability to receive political information. The poor digital literacy rates within needy economic groups obstructs their capacity to understand and interact with political websites as well as digital voting infrastructure and e-governance websites. The focus of political parties on urban digital campaigns fails to address voters from less wealthy segments who continue to use traditional communication methods in election rallies, word of mouth campaigns and village meetings.

Political Consequences of Rural Digital Exclusion

Political debates along with campaign communications function unequally between rural residents and urban constituents.

- Limited representation of rural concerns in digital policymaking discussions.

Rural populations rely on traditional election rallies for politician visits which maintains traditional political patronage systems.

Closing the digital gap depends on making the internet affordable and building digital abilities and implementing particular strategies for online political engagement focused on rural areas.

5.3 Younger Generations Participate More in Digital Activism, While Older Groups Rely on Offline Networks

Young persons in India maintain active digital political engagement through activism yet older voters primarily depend on physical grassroots networks to participate in politics.

5.3.1 Youth Dominance in Digital Political Movements

Social media users in India reach more than 400 million individuals and the majority of these users belong to the youth segment (18-35 years). Young voters take part in online petitioning activities together with electronic protests and electoral marketing initiatives. Millions of young voters joined political movements by using hashtags for CAA Protests, MeToo and Farmers Protest. Political parties address young voters by employing Instagram, Twitter and YouTube campaigns that use memes with influencers and viral videos to secure their support.

5.3.2 Older Generations Rely on Offline Political Networks

Elites within senior age groups and middle-aged populations use community forums and newspapers combined with televised political debates for their activism. The older population who use smartphones less frequently legitimizes their reduced involvement in digital-based political activities. Political leaders organize door-to-door events combined with live rallies to reach older voters who choose traditional political interaction methods.

Political Consequences of the Age-Based Digital Divide

Political debates receive direction from digital activism performed by youth members yet actual election results tend to belong to older adult voters. Older voters remain vulnerable to fake information because they depend on television broadcasts combined with traditional WhatsApp message sharing. The political establishment devotes its digital strategy to reaching younger voters yet maintains no strategy for digital policy discussions involving senior citizens.

5.4 Major Political Parties' Adoption of Digital Campaigns

5.4.1 BJP's Digital Political Strategy

The BJP established the first digital election campaign in India by combining data analysis with social media focus and WhatsApp group activity. Through his active digital engagement Narendra Modi enables the BJP to activate voters who use technology in their daily life. During the 2019 elections BJP spent more than ₹270 crore on digital advertisements which exceeded the spending of all other competing parties.

5.4.2 Indian National Congress (INC) and Digital Mobilization

Digital strategies have been implemented by the Congress Party but they do not match the digital leadership of the BJP. Online voter engagement by the INC remains limited because they keep utilizing conventional rallies alongside door-to-door campaigns rather than developing digital methods. Challenges of Digital Political Campaigns. Rainy digital access keeps disadvantaged social groups out of reach from online political processes.

Public opinion receives negative impacts from both unverified information as well as untrue news content. The online election strategies used by political parties do not connect with rural voters which intensifies information inequalities. Digital political campaigns predominantly serve families who live in cities and have higher education levels and belong to younger demographics even though they lock out residents from rural areas who are lower income earners along with older citizens from accessing digital resources. Political parties should build digital bridges to close rural-urban digital gaps by enhancing education levels and designing user-friendly online tools to reach excluded voters.

6. Digital resources need improvement to give equal rights to political participation for all citizens.

Digital inequality in India produces significant impacts on political involvement and democratic involvement and governance systems. The digital advantages that urban populations with education and wealth access extend only to those groups while rural and less privileged groups face digital barriers that prevent them from reaping these benefits. Such inequalities create barriers for inclusive democratic systems while making representation less equitable and reducing political knowledge.

The digital divide requires comprehensive solutions because it exists as a technical matter alongside economic and political segregation so policy changes together with online educational programs alongside smart infrastructure establishment and politics of inclusion are required. The section outlines recommended policies together with civil society and NGO involvement to deal with digital disparities that can build a more inclusive political domain for India.

6.1 Policy Recommendations for Bridging the Digital Divide

Policymakers need to work on resolving infrastructure problems alongside the price of digital services to build digital literacy and eliminate gender gaps and caste-based discrimination in order to create equal accessibility of digital political engagement. Six essential policy choices have been outlined below to unite India across the digital divide and support comprehensive political accessibility throughout the nation.

6.1.1 Expanding Rural Digital Infrastructure

The digital divide requires use of robust infrastructure to connect rural areas with Internet because these communities currently have only 37% connectivity whereas urban regions reach 72%. Real digital connectivity weaknesses prevent marginalized communities from joining political discussions as well as e-governance activities and political digital campaigns.

Policy Recommendations for Rural Digital Expansion

BharatNet Acceleration: BharatNet should be both speeded up and closely monitored for achieving effective implementation because it seeks to connect all 250000 village panchayats with broadband. Remote digital infrastructure implementation speeds up through the public-private partnership model because it helps reach areas that are otherwise difficult to connect.

Mobile Network Expansion:

To promote 4G and 5G network expansion in marginalized villages the government should offer telecom companies tax advantages alongside financial grants and flexible telecommunications licensing frameworks.

Public Wi-Fi Initiatives:

The installation of community Wi-Fi platforms at rural schools along with panchayat offices and community centers generates free or affordable internet access for residents without personal internet connections.

Political Impact of Rural Digital Expansion

- Increased voter awareness through digital campaigns.
- Greater participation in e-governance and government welfare schemes.

Rural residents gain empowerment when they participate in online political debates as well as government policy development processes.

6.1.2 Digital Literacy Programs: Training Marginalized Communities in Digital Skills

The capability to use digital tools effectively stands as a major factor which allows people to engage with politics. Lacking digital proficiency bars people from using digital tools productively in their efforts to gain political awareness and conduct advocacy and remain actively engaged in politics.

Policy Recommendations for Digital Literacy Expansion

Integration of Digital Literacy in School Curricula: Primary schools and secondary schools across rural areas and low-income locations should begin teaching digital education. School-based instruction about essential internet skills together with safety protection techniques and fact-checking methods and digital political skills development will provide permanent digital competencies for students.

Community-Based Digital Literacy Programs: The government should work through NGOs and local organizations to deliver digital training to rural groups together with groups such as Dalits, Adivasis and low-income households. The Internet Saathi program run by Google and Tata Trusts should widen its scope to deliver training that includes political education for rural women.

Mobile-Based Digital Literacy: The government needs to create mobile applications and sound-based digital education systems in native languages to assist people who do not understand English in utilizing digital platforms.

Political Impact of Digital Literacy Programs

Democratic voters will gain access to diversified political sources beyond television or deceptive WhatsApp group content. The government will see higher digital participation because of online protests together with online petitions and policy debates. The scheme developed better political understanding in rural areas and among less privileged communities.

6.1.3 Gender-Inclusive Digital Policies: Enhancing Women's Access to Digital Tools

Many women in India encounter multiple digital and political obstacles because of patriarchal rules and economic limitations along with online abuse through digital channels. The gender digital divide creates barriers that prevent women from joining online political conversations and digital governance activities and voting debates.

Policy Recommendations for Gender Digital Inclusion

Free smartphone distribution with financial assistance services should be available to low-income women throughout India.

2. Expanding Women's Digital Literacy Programs, particularly in rural areas.

Legislation reform targeting online harassment needs improvement to create security that protects women who take part in political discussions.

Political Impact of Gender Digital Inclusion

- More women in online political discussions.
- Increased female voter participation through digital voter awareness campaigns.
- Greater representation of women's issues in digital policymaking spaces.

6.1.4 Caste-Inclusive E-Governance: Ensuring Representation of SC/ST Groups

Modern information technologies exclude Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes from using e-governance systems as well as digital political platforms. **Policy Recommendations for Caste Inclusion in Digital Political Engagement SC/ST Digital Awareness Campaigns:** The government must launch awareness campaigns specifically aimed at Dalit as well as Adivasi communities to show them e-governance programs as well as voting rights through online channels of political engagement.

Subsidized Internet for SC/ST Students: Students attending schools and living in hostels of SC/ST communities should receive complimentary internet service to develop their digital understanding and political consciousness.

Political Impact of Caste Digital Inclusion

Modern political discussions online will give strength to the voices of Dalit and Adivasi communities.

- Reduced discrimination in access to government services.

Marginalized communities obtain higher representation at digital political places through inclusive measures.

6.1.5 Affordable Internet and Smartphone Policies: Reducing Data Costs

The expensive nature of internet services together with smartphone costs make it impossible for low-income families to access digital democracy.

Policy Recommendations for Affordable Internet Access

- i. The Australian government should lower the value-added tax (GST) relating to mobile phones and data plan subscriptions.
- ii. Public-Private Partnership for Low-Cost Internet similar to Jio's rural expansion model.

Expanding Free Public Wi-Fi Zones in Low-Income Areas.

Political Impact of Affordable Internet Access

- Higher voter awareness and participation in online governance.
- Reduced information gap between rich and poor voters.
- More inclusive online political engagement.

6.2 Role of Civil Society and NGOs in Bridging the Digital Divide

The digital inclusion gaps at the last mile require civil society organizations together with NGOs to fill the gaps after the significant contribution made by government digital expansion programs.

6.2.1 Training Marginalized Communities in Digital Literacy

Community-based educational programs led by NGOs concentrate on delivering digital competence and political knowledge to rural residents together with representatives of Dalits Adivasis and women.

Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) through its training initiatives has educated more than thousands of rural citizens in digital skills.

6.2.2 Advocating for Equitable Digital Policies

NGO advocacy aims to influence the government toward developing pro-poor digital policies combined with gender-inclusive digital strategies and digital empowerment initiatives for SC/ST communities.

Civil society groups should actively track government e-governance programs to guarantee their programs include all populations.

6.2.3 Providing Alternative Platforms for Offline Engagement

They should develop mixed methods that merge offline activities with online platforms to enable marginalized groups to engage in political discussions although they do not have complete access to the internet.

7. CONCLUSION :

The digital divide within India functions as a vital force which forms the political landscape by strongly impacting how different social economic groups participate in politics. The quick adoption of digital technologies alongside online political platforms by the country maintains a major gap between population segments who can and cannot access these systems. The digital divide intensifies present social economic disparities by allowing only those from particular wealthier sectors to take part fully in political activities which leaves other underprivileged people outside of basic political participation.

Members of privileged groups who exist among urban affluent society possess the required digital abilities and technological tools needed to engage in online political activities. The ability of privileged groups to access social media platforms together with online voting platforms and digital mobilization programs enhances their political influence. Marital groups which comprise rural residents coupled with poor people together with Dalits and female populations encounter numerous difficulties when trying to use digital resources and participate in the digital arena. Physical limitations such as unstable internet and costly technology combined with knowledge deficiencies and social customs work together to block individual involvement in digital political activities. Women who lack equal technology opportunity face intensified risks of exclusion when it comes to digital political activities.

The current inequality in digital access destroys democratic inclusivity in India while simultaneously maintaining and expanding current social and political inequalities. People from marginalized groups face limitations because they lack opportunities to express concerns or take part in significant political choices or communicate with political actors or political movements. Disenfranchising citizens due to political division results in deepened societal divisions which breaks the democratic assurance of universal citizen participation.

Both government and institutional policy actions should be implemented to solve these issues. The government must invest in establishing digital networks accessible to every citizen who seeks access to affordable network services and reliable connections particularly in isolated and neglected areas. Civil society organizations should actively work to achieve digital access justice and prevent marginalized groups from being excluded from the digital era.

Digital literacy initiatives hold an essential position because of their overwhelming importance. People need essential digital competence which enables them to interact with online spaces and take part in web-based politics while mastering digital technology tools in order to achieve democratic digital equity. Specialized programs for marginalized communities must adapt according to their specific requirements by overcoming obstacles they face when they participate in democratic operations.

A complete effort to address digital disparity needs joint action from the state together with public support involvement along with educational programs teaching digital skills. A representative democracy requires both digital platform access equity for all citizens alongside digital engagement capabilities so India can achieve inclusivity in its democratic system. Digital transformation in the country will succeed only if it accomplishes the vital task of maintaining equality between all citizens by empowering each person to use their voice regardless of their background status or geographic location.

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