Digital Absence in the Age of AI: Examining an Extremely Marginalized Community Through the Lens of Inclusivity and Structural Violence

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ABSTRACT

Today, in the era of artificial intelligence (AI), the digital excess has become an essential right to education and inclusion. But it is a slinking persistent status of millions, like the Musahar, Chamar, Tatuwa, Dhobi, Dusad of The Terai plain of Nepal, the rate at which digital exclusion from access to information and technology is fucking difficult to integrate AI and social justice. Under me as a volunteer deputy director, the current research done for school children of the oppressed Dalit communities are the student studying for free tuitions organized by peace4dalits institute. Deputy Executive Director of the organization, who volunteer to speak-out. In a mixed-methods design, this study involves the collection of quantitative data from 200 students (20% of the 1000 in free tuition classes), as well as individual qualitative life history narrative interviews. Descriptively, the students' families hardly hold any modern device, as only 2% have a mobile phone, none have a computer (0%), 2% own internet under the cellular model, which implies the use of a basic access to data. The qualitative findings reveal that two barriers account for this digital vacuum - poverty (families don't have access to digital devices) and a lack of digital literacy (families do not have people to accompany/teach them). According to students, this disconnection means they are falling behind at school, lacking access to digital learning opportunities and have no idea what the changing digital world looks like. Yet even in community-operated tuition centers these obstacles still hinder their access to education and social inclusion. Finally, this article highlights that digital absence in such contexts is not merely a technological divide but a kind of structural violence. "Solving it demands comprehensive, affordable, community-based digital access programs ones that emphasize AI literacy and culturally sensitive digital literacy programmes that will leave no one behind in the AI era.

KEYWORDS: Digital exclusion, Madhesi Dalits, structural violence, economic inequality, Caste discrimination

INTRODUCTION

In the world of computerization, progress has become the accelerating tempo of artificial intelligence (AI), digital access is no longer a privilege but a fundamental right that defines education, employment and social inclusion. Only, not all enjoy this privilege. Discrimination based on caste remains rife throughout life in Nepal's Terai region, even in digital technology. Most marginalized among them are the Scheduled Caste groups, which include the Musahar, Chamar, Tatuwa, the community classified as Dhobi and other Dusad community. Even though

they have constitutional rights, they are digital ghosts—without the tools, the training, the data-laden background, indeed the bandwidth to engage with the society of the moment, dominated by AI. This study, carried out by the Peace4Dalits Foundation, with a volunteer Deputy Executive Director as author, seeks to critically address this digital vacuum. Adopted a qualitative multi-method study the study analyses the range of digital exclusion of 200 students (equivalent to 20% of the total 1,000 students who are attending free tuition centers) (Peace4Dalits Nepal, 2025), the underlying causes and the social and education implications. The larger goal is to reframe digital absence, not just as a digital divide, but as a form of structural violence that intensifies inequality and caste-based marginalization.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Structural violence, as conceptualized by Johan Galtung (1969), directs researchers to consider how systems and structures (social, political) can create, and do, create obstacles to people for the development and maintenance of life. Dalits in Nepal and especially in Terai are among the prime victims of such entrenched violence. This violence ranges between landlessness and illiteracy to digital exclusion. From this perspective, digital absence is more than an issue of lagging behind in technology use; rather, it is representative of centuries-old systems of exclusion now also taking up residence in the digital domain.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Digital Inequality And Caste-Based Structural Discrimination

Dalits in Nepal generally fall at the lowest echelon in the socioeconomic hierarchy, a situation further exacerbated for Madhesi Dalits living in Terai. In a study carried out by Yadav (2023) it is highlighted that digital exclusion and caste-based discrimination are interconnected and that Terai Dalits not only suffer from systematic exclusion but also from economic deprivation (Nepali Times (2022). Less than one-in-three rural Dalit households own any sort of digital equipment, and less than that are connected to the internet (Nepali Times, 2022). This gap is especially evident among two groups, Musahar and Dusad communities, predominantly because of the amalgamation of poverty and culture, which encourage lack of education and social isolation. In addition, the literacy level among Terai Dalits is alarmingly low at 51.9 per cent, comparing poorly to the overall Dalit literacy (67.4%) and much less than the national average of more than 75% (Yadav, 2023). This gap in education heavily influences the lack of digital tools access, creating the vicious circle of exclusion.

DIGITAL LITERACY AND AI DIVIDE

Digital literacy comprises access, understanding and effective use of digital tools— all critically important for people if they are to capitalize on the advancements of AIs and e-learning systems. Yet, as VIN Nepal (2023) points out, digital literacy is an alien concept to rural Dalit communities, where educational content is also neither tailored to cultural norms nor practically available. As AI becomes more and more part of education – for example, via adaptive learning systems, intelligent tutoring and personalized pathways, a student without even basic connectivity

is effectively locked out. This creates a two-tiered digital divide: one among internet haves and have-nots and another between the AI literate and those digitally invisible (Toma & Li, 2025; Our Future Is Science, 2024).

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research designs to provide a holistic understanding of digital exclusion in marginalized Dalit communities. The sample includes 200 students (1/5th of this population) from 1,000 students taking tuition in tuition centers run by Peace4Dalits Foundation. These centers are free, run buy our NGO, Peace4Dalits Nepal Foundation and provide education support in Parsa district in Nepal's southern Terai belt. Structured surveys were used as data collection tool on digital ownership and access, and in-depth interviews were conducted among 25 students to gather their lived experiences with regard to digital exclusion.

RESULTS

The results of the research are as follows:

Figure 1: Digital Asset Ownership Among Surveyed Dalit students households

Device/Internet	Ownership (%)
Mobile Phone	2
Computer	0
Home Internet (mobile data)	2

As Table 1, the survey data reveal, digital access is vanishingly rare for Dalit households in Nepal's Terai none of the respondents owned a computer or tablet, and only 2% owned a mobile phone. In addition, only 2 percent of households had any form of internet facility, which generally only included basic mobile data that was used mostly for calling up or messaging people. This extremely low owning of digital assets points out the poverty and social exclusion are the reason for a growing digital gap, and Dalit students are left out from the access to online education, digital society, this making the technology age, a new source of marginalization. The numbers illustrate all too clearly how digitally impoverished these households are, exacerbating their isolation from educational and civic opportunities.

The qualitative interviews provided further insight into the structural origins of these trends. The two most common obstacles identified by students were:

1. Economic poverty: A majority of students reported that their house or ds could not buy digital gadgets nor support any data on regular basis. One student stated, "My father is an unemployed man, having a smartphone is not even in our dreams." It is the situation of most of the students studying there.

2. Digital illiteracy: Households with no adult members who know how to use digital tools left students without mentors. Many said they had "seen computers but never touched one" Students expressed, over and over again, that they felt left out of technology and that they were disconnected from the global world. Their presentation of disaffection corresponds with the

notion of invisible apartheid as a phenomenon in which exclusion is naturalized. Digital isolation has other implications for students: poor academic performance, inability to attending online classes or do digital homework, and absence from social development and career planning. One student recounted, "During COVID, we had no classes. Even when others were studying online, we didn't even know which apps to use."

DISCUSSION

The results make it very clear that the absence of digital (media) in these Dalit communities is not a question of choice, stubbornness or rejection of change. Instead, it is the product of long-term structural impediments which are derived from caste-based hierarchies, systemic impoverishment and infrastructural neglect. This privation amounts to structural violence with exclusion as a vicious circle, exporting Dalit students out of both digital education and AI-enabled resources (Galtung, 1969) especially in this digitalized world of ours. As AI transforms education—from algorithmic grading to predictive analytics to adaptive learning systems where communities and individuals without access to such tools will fall further behind (Toma & Li, 2025). Unchecked tech sprawl, it turns out, does not force a march of neutrality but often only automates structural bias and inflates social imbalance. Compounding the problem further is the absence of Dalit articulation in the discussions on AI policy. With no seat at the table when it comes to tech development or digital literacy programming, these communities are erased from the algorithmic datasets and AI applications that might otherwise be leveraged for empowerment. Notably, small-scale interventions show promise. These results suggest the need for politicians, non-government organizations (NGOs) and educators to implement inclusive and culturally compatible digital projects. These strategies cannot only supply devices and connectivity, they should include an AI literacy in their curricula, emphasize the community ownership of programs, and insist on representation in technology policy spaces of the voices of marginalized people.

LIMITATION

This study is limited to 200 Dalit students from Peace4Dalits tuition centers in Parsa district, so findings may not represent all Terai Dalits. Reliance on self-reported data risks recall or social desirability bias. The qualitative sample (25 interviews) may not capture diversity across caste subgroups or gender. Quantitative results are descriptive, lacking causal analysis. Being cross-sectional, the study cannot track changes over time, limiting its ability to assess the evolving impacts of technology and AI inclusion efforts.

CONCLUSION

This paper puts on stress on the digital absence of Terai Dalits not as an individual failing, or a developmental oversight, but as a systemic injustice that is closely linked to the socio-political bedrock of Nepal. The figures reveal a shocking absence of basic digital connectivity, with poverty, digital illiteracy and cultural exclusion emerging as major barriers. The stories tell of how a lack of digital means causes educational disengagement, social disconnect and lifelong economic marginalization. In the era of AI, not taking marginalized communities into

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account will not merely widen the digital divide; it will solidify it into a chasm of algorithmically perpetuated inequity. Solutions need to be multi-scalar, covering device distribution, localized digital education, AI inclusivity modules and most importantly, policy reform that is prioritized for the most excluded.

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