

## **The Politics of Digital Divide with Special Reference to India**

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**ABSTRACT:** It is generally believed that technology is an apolitical concept. Technology is the same for all humans and the same will happen with ICTs in the information age. But when we analyze deeply, we find that it is not so. Statistics and experiences make it clear that neither everyone has equal access to ICTs, nor does everyone has the same ability to use them, nor does everyone has equal control over it. Hence, ICTs is not an apolitical concept. Hence Integration of ICTs in all aspects of human lives have brought some positive changes and has also raised some concerns. The present paper examines and analyses one such concern of digital divide in reference of India.

Key Terms: Digital Divide , Gender Based Digital Divide, Politics of Digital Divide

### **1. Introduction**

Information is called power. The one who has access to accurate and faster information will be more powerful than others. In the history of human civilization, there were different mediums for dissemination of information at different times. All sections of society did not have equal access and control over the mediums of information. The twenty-first century is called the century of information revolution because it developed such technologies by which any type of information and any amount of information can be delivered in a blink of an eye to the whole world. We know these technologies as Information Communication Technologies or ICTs.

Professor Feras A. Batarseh of the London School of Economics has developed a theory of knowledge doubling in order to understand how much information is being produced in the era of information in which we are living. According to which he says that human knowledge was doubled in a century till 1900. By 1950, it was doubled every 50 years, by 2000, the knowledge started doubling every year and today the knowledge gets double with each passing day. He calls this the tsunami of knowledge. Through ICTs i.e. information communication technologies, this knowledge is stored and communicated from one person to another by converting it into digits.

### **2. Significance of the Study**

It is generally believed that technology is an apolitical concept. Technology is the same for all humans and the same will happen with ICTs in the information age. But when we analyze deeply, we find that it is not so. Statistics and experiences make it clear that neither everyone has equal access to ICTs, nor does everyone has the same ability to use them, nor does everyone has equal control over it. Hence, ICTs is not an apolitical concept.

In further analysis, we will see that this information society divides people into two categories. First category is of the people who have access to ICTs, who can use it and who control it, and another category consists of people who neither have access to ICTs, if they have, they neither have ability to use it nor do they control it. People in the first category are termed as 'haves' and people in the second category are termed as 'have nots'. In fact, ICTs have become a tool of power in the information age just like capital used to be in industrial society. We also term it as digital exclusion or digital divide. Describing the power of ICTs, Friedman, author of the book titled 'The World is Flat', wrote that "during the Cold War the nations that were the most powerful had the largest bomb; the most powerful nations in the information age will be the ones with the fastest modems."

### 3. Objectives of the Study

1. To what extent the various sections of society have access to the tools of ICTs i.e. computer, internet, electricity, mobile phone etc.
2. How many and who in our country have been using ICTs.
3. Who Controls use of ICTs?

### 4. Methodology

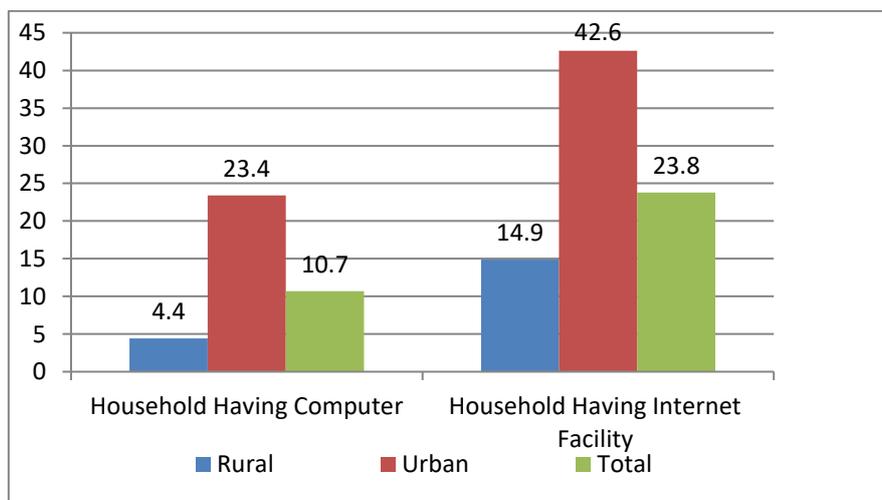
The study is based on data collected from secondary sources that includes research papers, reports and news items.

### 5. Discussions

After discussing this power and importance of ICTs, let us now look at some data in reference to India. First of all, let us see that to what extent the various sections of society have access to the tools of ICTs i.e. computer, internet, electricity, mobile phone etc.

### ACCESS TO AND AVAILABILITY OF ICTS

Figure 1 Showing Households having Computer and Internet Facilities



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Figure 2 . Showing the ability to operate & use Computer and Internet and actually used Internet ( Male Female and Rural Uraban)

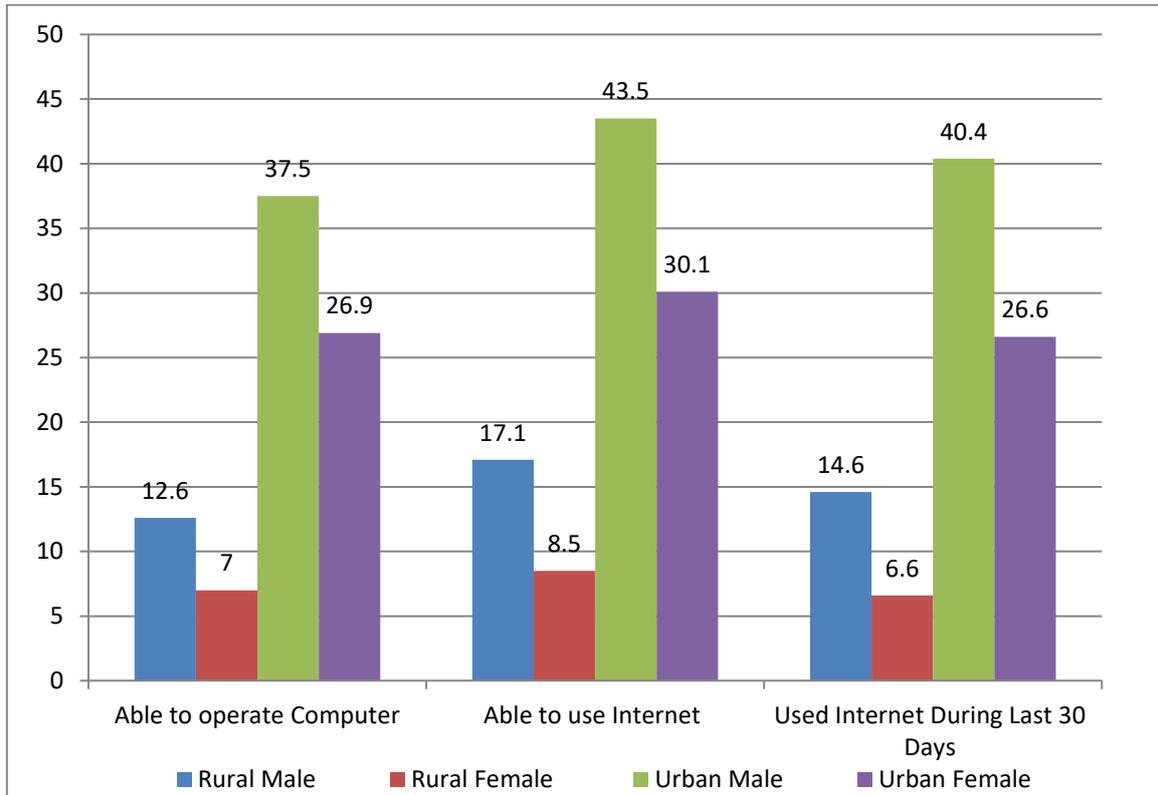
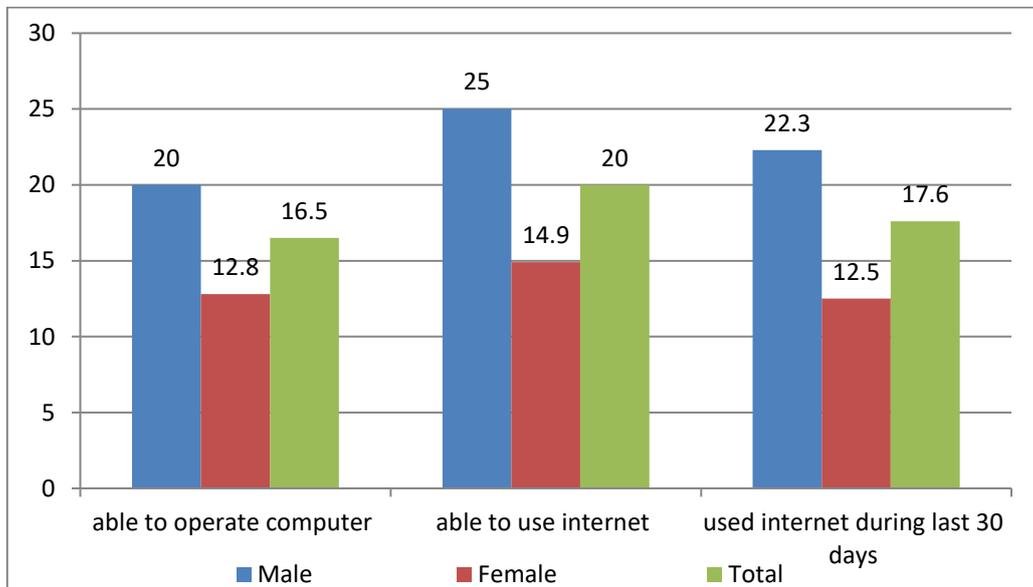


Figure 3. Ability to use & Operate Computer and Internet and Actually used Internet during last 30 days ( Male Female)



Interpretation of Figure 1,2, 3

It is clear from these figures that in India a very large section of the society has comparatively little access to the tools of ICTs. Access to the digital world of a large section is only from smart phones

that have their limitations and cannot be expected to have the quality that a computer can get. And then even in mobile, the size of the screen, memory etc. impacts usefulness.

The availability of ICTs does not ensure that everyone will be able to use it equally. Let us see some statistics about how many and who in our country have been using ICTs.

**USE OF ICTs**

Figure 4 Internet Penetration among Rural Urban Male and Female

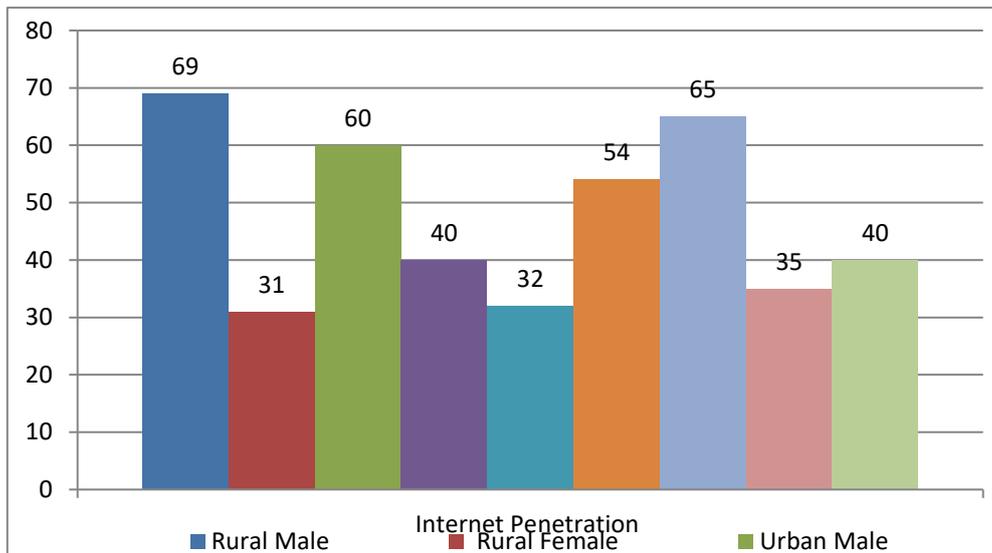


Figure 5. Internet Penetration in India Age Group & Rural Urban basis

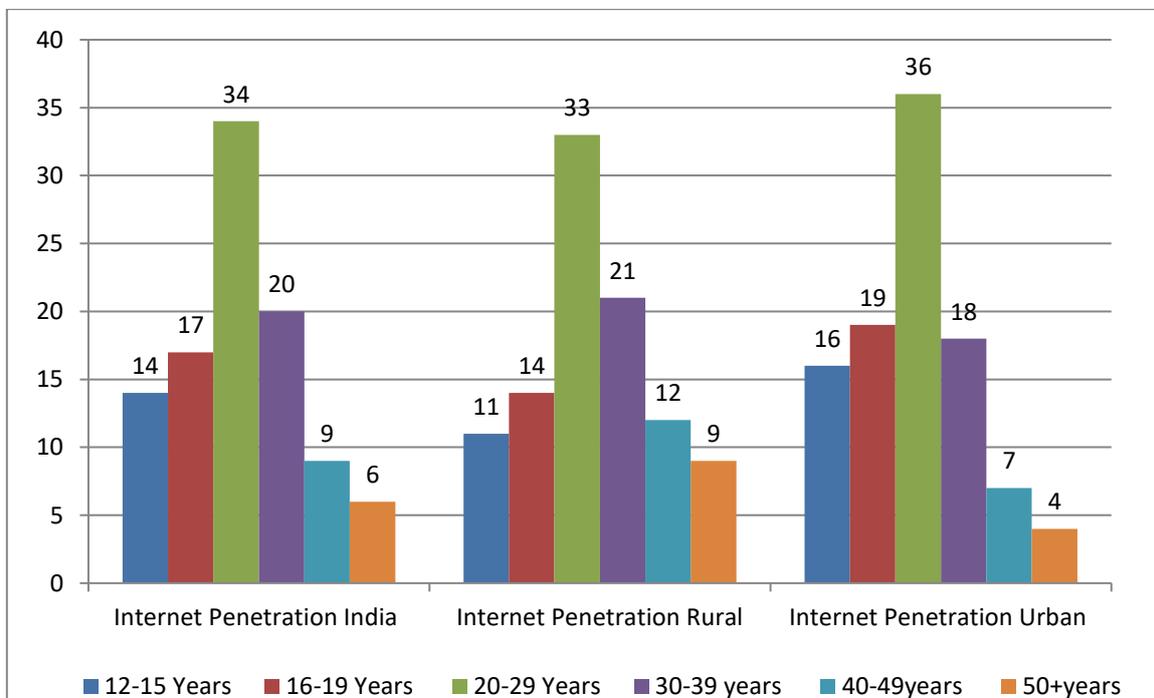
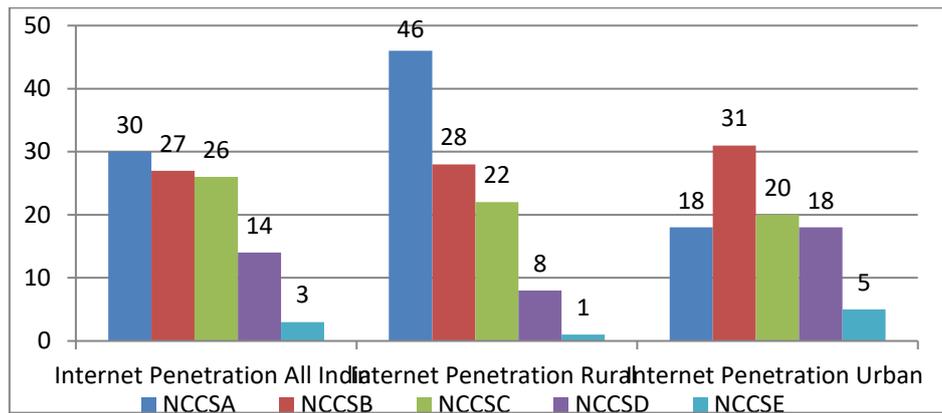


Figure 6. Internet Penetration in India Rural Urban

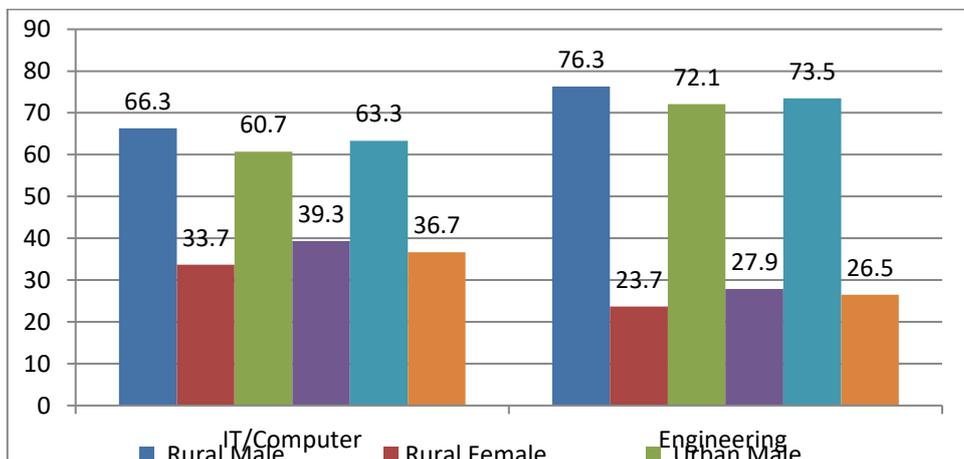


Interpretation of Figures 5 and 6

It is clear from these figures that nearly sixty percent of the population in India is still excluded from the digital space. In rural areas, the internet is still out of the reach of almost seventy percent of the population, this gap increases with age. Older people have the lowest access to the Internet. About two-thirds of total internet users are in the age group of twelve to twenty-nine years. Similarly, on the basis of the social economic status, classes, which are at the bottom of the society, they are also at the bottom of the digital space. The number of women using the Internet is about half that of men. And these figures are not unexpected either. It is very clear that the sections of the society which are lagging behind in literacy, level of education, economic status are excluded in the digital space. Another data of NSSO is worth noting. Gender based data of students studying in Information Technology / Computer related courses. One example can be given here. The data related to the languages of content available on the world's websites of July. Total 59.1 % websites use English language and total 0.15 websites use Hindi language. There are about 72 crore people in India whose mother tongue is a regional language, but the percentage of websites that provide content in these languages is only 0.1 percentage. Thus a large number of people who do not know English are deprived of accessing information available through ICTs.

**GENDER BASED DATA ON STUDENTS STUDYING IT/COMPUTER RELATED COURSES**

Figure 7 Participation of Women in IT Related Courses



### Interpretation of Figure 7

It is clear that the number of women in these courses is much less than men. Due to this reason and patriarchal thinking of our society, the number of women in Information Technology related jobs is less.

### **CONTROLE OVER ICTs**

Does the ability to access and use ensure that all sections of the society can use ICTs freely and at their will for their own benefit? There are many instances in newspapers when women are banned from using mobile phones. In Rajasthan state of India a man busted the head of a woman simply because he thought she was more focused on mobile phones and less on household chores.( Times News Network :2019) A woman *Sarpanch*( Head of rural local self-government in India) in Chhattisgarh divorced her husband because she was using mobile. She used to talk to other *Panchas*( Members of elected body of rural local self-government in India) , other *Sarpanchas*, officials , about the work related to the *Panchayat*( Elected body of Rural Local Self Government in India).She was no longer dependent on her husband's advice. The husband did not like it. One day he asked his wife to get rid of her mobile. The wife considered mobile as a source of self-reliance. One day the husband asked her to choose the mobile or one of the husbands, she chose the mobile. Mobile use for unmarried girls was banned in a district of Gujarat. It was classified as a social crime. The caste panchayat issued this order and the local MLA supported it. It is believed that this order was issued after a few episodes of marriages by girls with other caste boys. Ban was imposed on girls' mobile use in a district of Uttar Pradesh too.

Incidents of harassing women online have become very common. So common that even public celebrities like Deepika Padukone( A known Indian Actress) became victim of it. (Dasgupta Priyanka : 2020)More recently Agrima Joshua, a female stand-up comedian was threatened with online rape threats .( The Wire : 2020)The Women's Commission of India said that at the time of Covid-19, they receivednearly four times increased complaints of onlineharassment against women. And unfortunately that there is no separate laws to deal with online harassment cases with women neither there is separate cybercrime cell.

The statistics shows that people of older age group use internet the least. With age, the ability to learn new technology decreases and also they have less understanding of technical issues like cyber security. If one has to use digital space due to some compulsion, then one can also become a victim of exploitation or fraud. Look at another statistic to understand who controls the information technology. According to a research conducted by Oxfam and News Laundry, among the twenty most followed journalists on Twitter in India, they are of the highest caste there is only one Muslim.( Mandal Dilip :2020)

Kiruba Munuswamy who is a Dalit women advocate in the Supreme Court who faced caste and gender based attacks for some of her posts. She says‘The message is 'we are not supposed to open our mouth. Social media is not an equitable place. There is a lot of misogyny there.’( Kiruba Munuswami :2016)Very recently there was an online protest which was against Twitter’s discriminatory policy of providing a verifiable blue tick account.( FIZA JHA and BISMEE TASKIN:2019)

## **GOVERNMENT CONTROLE OVER DIGITAL SPACE**

Another matter of concern is that Governments and market control over information technology has far exceeded the understanding of a common person. It is becoming a means of controlling the freedom of expression of common person by governments all over the world. In India too In the year after a long-running agitation --- the controversial section of IT --- has been invalidated by the court, according to the Internet shutdown website, since 2012 there have been 413 internet shutdowns in India.(Internet Shutdown website :2020) In 2018, 2017, 2016, there have been 106, 134, 79 times shutdownsrespectively. According to The Freedom on the Net report, India got a total of 55 out of 100 and was classified as a part of independent countries.

## **CONTROL OVER ICTS IS CONTROLE OVER OPINION**

Through the Internet, a common person shares his important data, his important information. This data is very important. How important is it? Let's try to understand a little bit. Those of you who use Facebook may have noticed that there are a lot of advertisements in its feeds. These advertisements are related to the items that one has recently purchased online or have only seen online. When one buys a product in Amazon, onesees other similar products. Facebook also shows different types of news. Similarly, when searching in Google, one sees many web pages. How does all this happen? They all use artificial intelligence and they send us more information by analyzing the entire information of what we read, what we buy, what we like. Thus it's obvious that they have control over what information will be sent to us. They have information about both our likes and dislikes, now according to that, they will send us the similar type of information as they want to influence our opinion, and one day we will start liking or disliking and also thinking as they want. This shows the power information technology combined with artificial intelligence has given to both the market and others to control the minds of common person.

Some time ago the Indian business tycoon MukeshAmbani had said that data i.e. information is the most powerful thing in today's world. If multinational companies are not taken to safeguard the data that Indians are going through, then we Indians will fall prey to a new type of colonialism which they called data colonialism and get excluded from the structure of world power. You can understand how important data is that India banned 59 apps from China. Not only to harm China financially, but also to protect the data related to its citizens. You all will remember the case of Cambridge Analytica data breach , in which there were allegations on Facebook that due to its negligence, the data of nearly 260 Million people around the world was leaked , that included data of 50 million Indians too . It was alleged that data is sold to political parties in India. The biggest evidence of ICTs' power to influence people is the IT cells of various political parties. And let me also tell you that there is still no such act in our country that prohibits the government or companies to use the personal data of their customers without their prior consent and to provide a compensation if the person suffer a loss due to use of his /her personal data , there is only the draft of a bill that is yet to be passed . (Mantthan, Rahul :2021)

## **6. Conclusion**

### **DIGITAL EXCLUSION IS EXCLUSION FROM OPPORTUNITIES**

It is clear from the above statistics and analysis that not all sections of the society have the ability to access and use information technology in society. Some sections are excluded from this digital world. And when these excluded classes are identified by statistics, we find that these are the same classes who were already excluded socially and economically. In fact, there is a fear that this digital exclusion may widen the exclusion of the historically excluded sections even more due to socio-economic realities of Indian society. This can be understood by two simple examples.

A student who studies in an expensive private English medium school is ahead of the poor student studying in the Government Hindi Medium School in the village in terms of opportunities. Imagine the difference between opportunities available to these two students in the world of online education?

Integration of ICTs in governance tends to limit participation of women in rural local self-government .( Saxena : 2010) research exploring the gender perspective of implementation of E-governance at *Panchayat* level , I noticed that after lots of difficulties women Sarpanchas started participating in the working of panchayatas themselves. But then computerisation of functioning of Panchayatas started .Due to lack of digital literacy women again have to depend upon the male members of their family to use the computer.

In both instances, one class is receiving fewer learning opportunities than the other due to digital exclusion. More over learning is associated with the attainment of socioeconomic and political opportunities. Less learning means less access to these opportunities. In The digital world that information technology is creating its more is likely that digital inequality may exacerbate already existing socioeconomic inequalities. Digital exclusion is not just exclusion but also exclusion from technology but from socioeconomic opportunities, participation in governance and ultimately exclusion from citizenship and democratic processes.

This is why Roger has called digital inclusion an important issue related to social justice. If some people do not have the ability to control ICTs, there are more chances that if such individuals or classes enter the digital space, then they can become victims of domination and even exploitation.

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