Research Article

Bridging the Digital-Language Gap: School Education in Rural and Urban Assam

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Abstract

The proliferation of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has given prominence to the digital divide discourse, which has become a subject of global concern. The multifaceted issue of digital divide and inequality is ingrained in broader cultural and socio-economic systems. These frameworks interact to create various opportunities and obstacles for various students in terms of access, understanding and effective use of digital technology for learning. Against this backdrop, this study also examines the relationship between linguistic proficiency as a form of cultural capital and digital divide in technology adoption among students in vernacular medium schools in Jorhat district of Assam. It finds that proficiency in dominant languages used in digital educational content and technological interfaces significantly enhances students' access and agency over technology and broader digital communities within their respective actor-networks which not only results in better academic performance but also helps in accumulation of further cultural capital. Conversely, lack of proficiency in these languages among rural and tribal students hinders their ability to engage with technology for educational purposes. Further, lack of cultural capital among teachers and parents represents critical gaps in the actor-networks which hinder technology adoption among rural and tribal students.

Keywords: Digital divide, language, rural-urban, schools, technologies

Introduction

With the emergence of computer network digital technology has profoundly changed the methods of creation, distribution and access of knowledge information. The possibilities coming up with the rapid and explosive growth of digital technologies for education and learning are vast and their potential to transform the entire process of schooling is well recognised. Through the distribution of information among people who have previously been denied it, they can increase social mobility chances and lessen historical disparities. With student-centric solutions, they may also improve teaching and learning flexibility and efficiency, boost digital literacy among school students, and offer the platform and resources for gaining new knowledge. However, the proliferation of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has given prominence to the digital divide discourse, which has become a subject of global concern. Caste, ethnicity, gender, language and socio-economic status are just a few of the social inequalities that have appeared along the usual lines of digital technology access, knowledge, and use disparities as these technologies have become more common and significant. The social inequalities that emerge due to unequal ability to access, adapt, and create knowledge via the use of

ICT is called digital divide (Warschauer, 2002). The digital divide that results from ICT's ability to reward proficient users with higher incomes as well as cultural and political advantages makes its effects more noticeable. The underlying tendency behind the seeming expansion and closing of ICT inequalities is that privileged groups are becoming even more privileged as a result of their increased efficiency in acquiring and using technology, which benefits them exponentially. Therefore, ICT disparities typically make existing disparities between developed and developing worse. These gaps can be based on location (rural or urban), gender, ethnicity, age, disability, and most importantly, income level. Due to a number of factors, including rural location, lack of financial resources, transportation, women's safety concerns and a lack of access to educational resources, India has been facing an education-based digital divide. Over the past few decades, the Indian government and corporate sector have undertaken a number of measures to reduce the digital divide. It has been significantly driven by government's focus on designing and strengthening online educational platforms and digital infrastructure facilities (such as DIKSHA, SWAYAM, PM e-VIDYA, Digital India, Bharat Net etc.) and catering to the rising demand for up skilling among students and teachers (NISTHA, DISHA, PMGDISHA etc.). In addition, there are educational radio programmes, direct-to-home (DTH) television channels like SWAYAMPRABHA and Gyan Brikshya and campaigns to raise awareness of digital issues. Technology integration and utilisation for teacher training, effective teaching and learning, and assessment procedures, and expanding access to underprivileged populations are all suggested under the New Education Policy, 2020. In order to support digital efforts like DTH channels, smart classrooms, and virtual classrooms, the Samagra Shiksha plan has been synchronised with NEP, 2020. Furthermore, the private sector's initiatives have led to cheaper smart phones and reduce internet rates, which have further increased accessibility for the aforementioned sections of society. In recent years, online education has been the most effective substitute for traditional classroom instruction in reducing the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdown on all students' academic accomplishments. However given the extent to which the digital divide has permeated Indian society, the number of such initiatives may not have produced the expected outcomes to date, but the process has undoubtedly begun in India.

Review of literature

Education has been considered as one of the most important agents of social transformation. As stated by Durkheim (1961), education is the process by which society creates a sense of belongingness among its members, which makes social life possible, as well as preparing them to become productive members of the society by fostering their commitment to a core set of shared beliefs and values. For Durkheim, education is essential in today's society since it equips people with the specialised skills needed for their future life. Education has been called a 'lever of social change' by Moore (1963) due to its benefits in fostering social mobility and transformation. But it is also true that gains like equality, progress and sustainable development are not always the results of education. Even though society's educational principles may be the same for everyone, unequal access to educational opportunities and educational outcomes can lead to unequal knowledge reproduction and the socio-economic power that comes with that information. In a nation with

structural inequality like India, a variety of socio-economic factors influence access to and utilisation of education. Current studies on social reproduction of education show that educational disparities that benefit the wealthier classes and expand the gap between them and the underprivileged segments of society are being perpetuated. Coleman (1966) finds that the inequalities imposed on children by their home, neighbourhood and peers during school directly translate into inequalities they confront during adult life after school. In this regard, Illich (1971) asserts that since it concentrates benefits among middle-class students while denying the poor access to education, schools are more likely to maintain the status quo and prolong student's ascribed socio-economic level than to foster achievement-based status. Althusser (2001) argues that education is one of the many social structures that form state ideological apparatus that upholds prevailing class beliefs and compels people to perform unintentional behaviours that perpetuate their class positions. Emphasising the connection between language proficiency and academic achievement, Bernstein (1971) claims that children from various socio-economic backgrounds acquire distinct linguistic codes as a result of the socialisation they receive from their families and communities, which affects how they experience school later on. The speech patterns that children from middle-class families learn through early socialisation meet curricular requirements and are rewarded in the classroom, but working-class children's speech patterns are frowned upon. This caused individuals to feel alienated, which hinders their ability to learn and makes them reluctant to engage in class. Therefore, in addition to economic resources, supremacy also requires social and cultural resources (Bourdieu, 1986). Nambissan (1994) supports this claim by stating that the exclusion of tribal languages and regional dialects from schools contributes to the low academic achievement, lack of interest in learning, and school dropout rates of tribal students. Weber (1978) observes that larger social inequalities are reproduced by the education system because higher status groups monopolise these resources through social closure.

Distinct socio-economic groups face distinct challenges and uncertainties when it comes to accessing high-quality education due to the intersection of sociological aspects of class, caste, ethnicity, language and gender. With the growing usage of ICT in schools, this has taken on a new level of stratification, one that is based on access, knowledge and use of digital technologies. Wellman et al. (2003) found that higher levels of self-reliance and entrepreneurial thinking are required of individuals enrolled in the majority of digital education programmes. Therefore, the concept of a digital learner emphasises people's ability to participate in an empowered manner, which is discovered only among the affluent students' groups. Following this, Calvert et al. (2005) found that families with higher income and higher education levels are more likely to own computers and have internet access at home. Kalyanpur and Kirmani (2005), based on secondary data, examined how cultural disparities, communication style variations, language obstacles, and lack of knowledge with services and hardware that contribute to the digital divide among students. Their research indicates that students from low-income families, rural households, minorities and disadvantaged groups are less likely to have access to modern technologies. Furthermore, societal perceptions and gender bias affect girls' access to and use of computer and the internet, similar inequalities also affect students with impairments. Sinha (2012) focusing on the extent of internet literacy found

that the main challenges experienced by internet students are limited working hours, lack of computers, slow internet and frequent power outages. Mishra and Gohain (2010) sharing similar views added that despite these obstacles digital resources are accessed and utilised on a daily basis by the students.

According to Oyedemi (2012), while digital inequality perpetuated the social inequality that many students already face, social inequality determines one's capacity to obtain digital knowledge. Yu et al. (2012) based on their findings said that parents with basic levels of ICT proficiency are better at managing their children's computer usage, and as a result, their children spend more time on educational activities than their peers from homes with less advanced ICT skills. They come to the conclusion that there is another digital divide in education in addition to the disparities in access and usage. It is demonstrated by the adept and wise use of ICT, and family is very important in this context. In Assam, Raja (2014) conducted research on the use and adoption of digital media and found that while 93.5 per cent of higher secondary students and 95 per cent of bachelor students used mobile phones, 29.8 per cent of higher secondary students and 54 per cent of bachelor students owned laptops. Nevertheless, social networking sites like Facebook account for the majority of digital media usage. Merely 10.2 per cent of students use it for educational and career-related purposes. Sarma and Das (2021) conducted a survey to study inequalities in education created due to rural-urban divide and class position in Assam. Only 14 percent respondents have access to online learning, while 86 percent respondents do not have digital learning experience. The biggest challenge, according to 91 per cent of respondents, is a lack of functional smart phones. Instead of sending their children to school, 52 per cent of respondents said they would rather to get them involved in household generating activities. Hussain et al. (2021) using secondary data found that poverty, infrastructure gaps, centralisation of ICT sector and illiteracy are the major causes behind digital divide in Assam. Further, they find while private schools, colleges and universities have successfully implemented digital learning process, students in government schools and colleges lag behind. Pizarro, Caballes and Vianzon (2024) find that digital literacy of elementary teachers in schools play an important role in determining how well they were able to perform their duties and responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Statement of the problem and objective

The multifaceted issue of digital inequality is ingrained in broader cultural and socio-economic systems. These frameworks interact to create various opportunities and obstacles for various students in terms of access, understanding and effective use of digital technology for learning. Relevant technologies in the field of education include computers, smart phones, radio, television, DTH connections, and the internet. First-level digital divide refers to disparities in access to these resources caused by social, economic and cultural variables. Further, inequality can also be observed in digital literacy, skills and readiness which determine whether a student is able to use these tools in a beneficial manner which is identified as the second level of digital divide (Attewell, 2001). As a result, students from low socio-economic backgrounds, low-income households, single parent households, villages and marginalised ethnic, linguistic and religious communities are particularly vulnerable. It is feared that digital inequalities will exacerbate

existing social disparities as ICT is becoming increasingly pervasive in the field of school education. A significant portion of the population lacks access to smart phones or the internet, especially in impoverished regions, rural areas and low-income families. This is demonstrated by the experience obtained from the emergency switch to fully digital mode of schooling during COVID-19 lockdown. In the contemporary scenario of the north-eastern state of Assam, many students and teachers have fallen behind in receiving and providing education due to irregular power supply, lack of access to smart phones and computers, poor internet connectivity and lack of technical knowledge. In Assam, just 15 per cent of schools have computers, 5.8 per cent have internet, and over 25,000 schools lack energy connections (Government of India, Ministry of Education, Department of School Education and Literacy, 2019). Compared to 78.3 per cent students in private schools, just 52.4 per cent of students at government schools own smart phones (Pratham Education Foundation and ASER Centre, 2020). There is also clear gender and rural-urban divides. Over 12.1 per cent of rural families in Assam have access to computers and the internet, compared to 46.9 per cent of urban households (Government of India, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, National Statistical Office, 2018). Only 28.2 per cent of women have ever used the internet, compared to 42.3 per cent of men (Government of India, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, International Institute for Population Sciences, 2020). To comprehend the facts on a practical level, a sociological examination of digital access and inequality among school students of Assam is therefore essential. Against this backdrop, this study seeks to evaluate the multitude of obstacles that students from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds face at individual level as well as at school level while using digital technologies for educational purposes. To do so, various social, economic and cultural factors such as like socio-economic background of students, gender, experience to use technology and psychological factors as well as regional and geographical factors like rural-urban divide has been explored in a qualitative manner.

Methodology

The present study is conducted in Jorhat district in Assam. It is known for its rich historical,

cultural and educational heritage. This study draws on phenomenological approach within sociology. It focuses on empathetic understanding to explore how individuals experience and interpret the world from their unique perspectives. One of the first major sociologists to bring phenomenological perspective into sociology was Weber (1978) whose idea of Verstehen or interpretation of subjective meaning that individuals attach to their actions and to the actions of others aligns closely with phenomenological approach. He argues that any social phenomena must be understood from the point of view of the actors through empathetic understanding.

The study uses random sampling to include 30 students each from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds in the three schools in Jorhat district of Assam which have been selected through purposive sampling. This helps in ensuring that the sample represents a diverse range of experiences with digital technologies across different social groups. The sampling is designed to reflect intersectional social inequalities such as class, gender, language and rurality that shape digital access and use. The first school is located in the

heart of Jorhat town. This school caters to a socio-economically diverse student body, including children from well-off households as well as low-income families. The mix of students from different social strata provided rich data on how digital capital varies even within urban areas. The second school is situated in a rural area and primarily serves students from nearby villages. Most of the students come from families engaged in agriculture, as well as from households of ASHA workers and daily wage earners among others. This setting helps examine the rural-urban divide in digital access and literacy. The third school is located near a tea estate, enrols students predominantly from the tea-tribe community, one of the most educationally marginalised groups in the state. The school offers insights into how socio-economic and cultural marginalisation shapes students; access to and use of digital technologies.

This study is based on both primary and secondary sources of data. The secondary data has been collected from newspapers, journal articles and various reports. The primary data is collected directly from the field by using methods and tools like interview schedule and non-participant observation. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select 30 students from each of the three high schools. The schools were chosen to represent diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Group discussions with the parents have been carried out to obtain a collective attitude towards education of their children. Further, non-participant observation played a key role in the data collection process. Non-participant observations across classrooms, schools, households and informal community setting offered thick descriptions of digital practices embedded in everyday lives of students, teachers and parents. Classroom activities, social interactions and the use of digital tools in both academic and informal settings were closely observed. Additional observations during parent-teacher meetings, result announcement and practical exams offered further insight into how each community used digital tools in education. The students of the three schools display varying levels of technology adoption for both educational and non-educational purposes. Document analysis was used to study educational materials such as textbooks and online resources. Official school records and academic results were also examined. Policy documents, government reports, books, journals and newspaper articles were also reviewed to contextualise the findings within wider discussions on digital inequality in Assam, in India

and globally.

Results and Discussion

In all the states of India including Assam, digital technology integration in education was revolutionised by the COVID-19 lockdown. Digital technology is becoming more important and relevant than ever in online education, content and communication. However, research indicates that students' digital capital determines their capacity to learn through digital technologies. As a result, there is a concern that the digital divide has developed along the familiar paths of social inequality that were previously present. As per the findings of the study, languages can both facilitate and hinder student's use of technology for both educational and non-educational purposes. Because English and Hindi languages are widely used in both instructional materials and technological interfaces, being proficient in these languages allows for a more engaging and rich interaction with technology. On the other hand, a lack of skill in these languages limits one's ability to use technology, which in

turn limits access to new opportunities and exacerbate already-existing social injustices. The students of the first school taken for study which is located in the Jorhat town, due to their fluency in Hindi and English have a major cultural capital advantage. This gives learners access to a wide variety of learning materials, such as advanced classes on websites like Gyan panda and Physicswallah, which offer excellent instructional content with outstanding pictures at reasonable prices. Additionally, it has made it possible for them to pursue interests and skills outside of the classroom, like learning a foreign language (inspired by their passion for foreign social media influencers, Korean drama and pop music, and Japanese anime, which they watch on various digital platforms with English subtitles), dancing, playing musical instruments, origami, football etc. Further, their ability to communicate in Hindi and English has allowed them to interact with virtual community members via social media and online gaming. These members have shown them new methods to take advantage of technology, including trading, content production, and online coaching. Such information spreads throughout school peer groups after being obtained from virtual friends. It is a significant resource for raising student's knowledge of digital issues.

Students at the other two schools in rural Jorhat are severely limited in their access to a wide range of educational resources due to their limited fluency in the prevailing languages. In contrast to the high calibre of resources accessible in Hindi and English, they face a conspicuous lack of high-quality academic literature in Assamese. They encounter noticeable deficiency in availability of quality academic content in Assamese medium which stands in contrast with the quality of resources available in English and Hindi. Rural students are forced to rely on the limited content that is either directly provided by their teachers or made available in Assamese through platforms like DIKSHA app and local online educators, in contrast to their urban counterparts who are fluent in these languages and have access to a wealth of educational resources. They usually face trouble utilising the DIKSHA app because of things like slow loading times, confusing interface and less engaging content. Many students reported slow loading speed. Others mentioned that the application often froze and lagged in their phones while loading interactive digital content. Furthermore, many local educators lack the financial means to match the high-end production value provided by their national and international counterparts who publish content in Hindi and English. Due to their inability to speak the prevalent language, rural students are consequently deprived of access to high-quality academic materials. Similarly, the prevalence of English jargons in the electronic interfaces and low digital skills among the teachers at the rural school resulted in major difficulties in employing technology to its fullest. As a result, they are unable to take full advantage of the technologies they employed. Teachers can play a crucial role in encouraging students in remote areas to accept technology, but this is a significant obstacle. The proactive efforts of an urban school teacher show how teachers can assist their children to more successfully navigate multilingual surroundings. Lastly, rural student's inability to communicate in the mainstream language deters them from using technology for non-academic activities. Unlike their urban peers, who use technology to acquire new skills and hobbies, this restriction limits their usage of technology outside of the classroom to unproductive leisure activities and entertainment pursuits.

This scenario demonstrates how a lack of language skills prevents human actors from actors interacting spontaneously with technology and other human players in the network. Unlike their urban counterparts, who are able to successfully navigate, enhance and reshape their actor networks, rural student's reliance on limited resources highlights a reactive adaptation to these limitations rather than an active engagement with the larger educational and technological network. This restricts rural student's chances for social mobility and the advancement of their cultural capital. Furthermore, the necessity of human-network compatibility with non-human players is illustrated by this scenario. The gap between students' and instructors' language proficiency and the main languages used in technology interfaces results in systemic limitations within the actor-network that impede students' acceptance of technology as well as teachers' professional development. In this sense, findings from the urban school show how teachers can help close the gap between the human and non-human players in the network. Conversely, the actor-network of the rural school has suffered from a lack of cultural capital.

Notwithstanding this discrepancy, students in both urban and rural schools acknowledged a distinct benefit: the capacity to depend on parents or siblings to decipher and clarify the lessons that teachers provide digitally in Assamese, especially during times of COVID-19 lockdown. In this case, parents and siblings become more active members in the network, demonstrating how the actor-network is extended into family domains. Family cultural capital is essential in this process because it helps to bridge the gaps between various network actors. Because their family members' language skills and the language of their course materials match, these students are able to take advantage of this benefit. However, indigenous communities who speak *Bagania* as their mother tongue are not eligible for this advantage because they do not have the necessary cultural capital. Assamese and Hindi are useful languages for certain tribal children whose siblings and cousins have worked in adjacent towns and cities like Jorhat, Sivsagar, Nagaon and Guwahati. Due to their focus on their own task, however, this leads to a fragmented and superficial adoption of technology. A significant gap in the actor-network is thus reflected in the lack of cultural capital resulting from restrictions in dominant language competency, where vital human players are unable to fulfil their duties because of incompatibility with non-human actors.

It is interesting to note that, over the course of two years, as more people have access to smart phones and the internet, rural tribal community students have become more involved with Hindi and English through social media, over-the-top (OTT) platforms, and online gaming. This has encouraged them to learn these languages informally because they want to be good at gaming or making new friends. This phenomenon suggests that the actor network is still growing, with digital media acting as a non-human actor to help human actors (school students, in this case) in the network improves their language skills and builds cultural capital. As seen in the rural school where some students have begun using resources like Gyanpanda and YouTube, this gives the human actors more agencies to actively interact with the actor-network. However, due to inadequate guidance, these students' adoption to technology and accumulation of cultural capital are predominantly driven by leisure and amusement, indicating a misalignment between the potential of technology adoption for educational reasons and their actual use.

Differences in the three schools' Gunotsav results for 2022 and 2023 show how the digital divide affects students' real-world outcomes. Due to the increased technological use, urban students performed well in Gunotsav in 2022, when online learning was the norm. This result can be explained by the students' privileged position within the actor-network due to their technological know-how and cultural capital, which enabled them to interact with other network actors and serve as crucial nodes in boosting the network's ability to promote academic success. Lower grade among rural and tribal students, on the other hand, are a reflection of their difficulties embracing technology and the negative consequences they encounter in the real world. Language is a barrier to the adoption of technology, as evidenced by the inability to bridge these gaps because of a lack of cultural capital. The transition to hybrid classrooms in 2023 resulted in significant progress among tribal and rural students, demonstrating how altering the non-human component of the network can close gaps in actor-networks and have a favourable impact on real-world results. The digital divide was somewhat lessened by the offline environment, but the problem of parents' low cultural capital was resolved by direct teacher-student interaction.

The results of this comparative study clearly illustrate the intricate relationship between cultural capital – more specifically language skills – and the digital divide in terms of technology use. It highlights the benefits that urban students have because of their fluency in Hindi and English, which allows them to participate in online communities that improve their learning and skill development and empower them to effect change in addition to having access to a wealth of educational resources. Contrarily, students in rural and tribal areas encounter significant difficulties since they are not proficient in these major languages, which restrict their access and engagement and contribute to the social reproduction of current disparities. Furthermore, teachers play a critical role in empowering students to use technology by assisting them in better navigating the digital world, irrespective of their language proficiency. The study also emphasised how resilient and flexible tribal and rural students are as they use technology in an informal manner to gradually improve the language skills. However, the potential advantages of using technology for education among indigenous people are disrupted by a lack of focused guidance. Differences in Gunotsav results in 2022 demonstrate how these discrepancies have a substantial impact on their academic outcomes. Nonetheless, hybrid classrooms have improved the performance of tribal and rural students by reducing effects of the digital divide and a lack of cultural capital. This study reflected how important it is to help teachers and students overcome language hurdles in order to guarantee fair technology adoption and democratise access to online learning materials.

Conclusion

Digital inequalities are major concerns beyond physical access. Although digital technology is becoming a necessary component of both education and modern life, not everyone has equal access to it (Miah, 2024). Overall, India's economic progress in the years since globalisation has been impressive, but it also has a social component with educational indicators. Despite the nation's increased literacy rates, there are paradoxical circumstances emerging. There are many school children who are tackling with the problems of inadequate access to

educational resources to meet the demands of digital educational facilities. Digital divide in the form of disparities in distribution of digital capital extends beyond access to digital technologies. Therefore, equal attention should be paid towards generating right attitude towards digital technology among students. Teachers and peer groups play an important role in helping students develop digital capital. Parents' attitude towards use of digital technology is also important. Finding quality content in local language is one of the biggest challenges. There is a dire need to pay close attention to access and participation of users of digital technologies in the Indian context in general and Assam, in particular. It is not only morally right to close the digital divide; it is also essential to guarantee that all people have access to high quality education. It is possible to guarantee that every student has an equal opportunity to succeed by giving priority to programmes that encourage fair use of educational technology, providing online resources to all, and training individuals in effective technology usage. In an effort to close the digital divide and expand access to digital resources, school management system software has emerged as a crucial instrument for streamlining administrative processes and enhancing communication between various stakeholders. By enabling educational institutions to adapt to the demands of the digital age, these systems encourage greater collaboration among educators, learners and parents.

Furthermore, to bridge the digital divide, especially in rural areas, where economic constraints limit smart-phone availability, radio and TV-based academic programmes on DTH were initiated by the state. Also, there is requirement for providing quality internet connection, availability of regional language content and its relevance, opportunities to utilise the ICT tools for routine work, and more importantly the skills and competencies of users with the various ICT tools in order to maximise the benefits of digital technologies.

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