

Chapter 44

India's Dalits Search for a Democratic Opening in the Digital Divide

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ABSTRACT

This chapter seeks to recognize and read the marginal presence on the Internet of India's most oppressed and stigmatized community, the Dalits, simultaneously as acts of resistance and acts of constituting both self and community. It is an exploratory exercise in writing the social history of technological media in general, and the Internet in particular. The medium of Internet, unlike most associated with script and print that preceded it, offers emerging users access without the censorship of either established authorities or canons of authoritative formal regulation. More significantly, it provides the Dalit community, heretofore excluded from all but the most marginal voice in civil society, with an entrance into the national discourse. And quite as important, it furnishes them with their first meaningful media platform for a nationwide internal discourse, which they have previously been denied.

INTRODUCTION: A DEMOCRATIC OPENING IN THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Most of the time when we think about the Digital Divide we are considering issues of class, the economic divisions of our societies and the social distance between those with access to informa-

tion technology and those with little or no access. There are, however, other meaningful measures within the perspective of social power available. There exists in India and the United States, and indeed most, if not all, nations, a division that both trumps and parallels class, offering us a valuable refinement worth considering in our view of the Digital Divide. In the United States we find this refinement when we bring the social construct

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of “race” into the picture.¹ In India we have a close variant of the same perspective in terms of “caste.”² In both of these cases we go beyond the simple hierarchy of classes to embrace the case of an antithetical class, a population treated as an enemy of the system as a whole, we can think of as an anathematized, stigmatized or criminalized class, caste or “race” (Tartakov, 2009). In both cases we have segments of the population occupying not only the bottom of the social hierarchy but an identity that is treated as if it was established against the system, and so we may say *doubly divided* from access to all social amenities from essentials like food, housing and employment to more extraordinary opportunities such as information-technology.

Though we include these *most-discriminated-against* in our vision of the society and the Digital Divide among those at the bottom of the class system, they actually play a distinctive role that is somewhat different from the other excluded populations they tend to be lumped into, a role that is worthy our interest. Observing the situation of the anathematized classes not only reveals discrimination at its most extreme—and so the divide at its most extreme—but also models of resistance at their most crucial and so a situation to watch for suggestions about how those denied access are resisting that denial and how we may contribute to that resistance.

India's caste system is a traditional, religious class system that categorizes people into a hierarchy on the basis of their supposed ritual purity as determined by their birth into historically fixed marriage circles, dividing power along the borders of those circles. Though its traditional categories are not precisely equivalent to India's economic classes, they parallel them closely enough to offer useful insights into their social dimensions (Shah, Mander, Thorat, Deshpande, & Baviskar, 2006; Deshpande & Darity, 2003). In India we see access to digital technology largely confined to the upper three of Hinduism's four great *varna* (macro-castes), the Brahmins and two other “twice

born”, so-called “Aryan” castes, that compose the national elite, along with a small upper layer of the fourth *varna*, the Shudra. The great majority of the fourth (lowest) *varna*—which comprises the great bulk of the Hindu population—has no access to digital technology. Outside and below the caste system, at bottom of the class system, are India's Dalits, (those defined by the government as Scheduled Castes), the Scheduled Tribes, and the religious minorities of Muslims and Christians, who are largely descendents of those groups. It is since the early 1970s that these people at the bottom of the social system have begun adopting designation of Dalit (*oppressed* or *ground down*), as opposed to the demeaning Brahmanical epithets like *achut* (untouchable) or governmental technical designations like Scheduled Castes.³ The significance of this new title comes from it being a self-definition based on their experiences, that recognizes the source of their situation in their exploitation by the upper castes rather than a negative definition placed upon them by those seeking to exploit them. What is most important for us may be to realize that Dalits represent seventeen percent of the Indian population or nearly 200 million people. They are a minority but quite a substantial one. If we include Scheduled Tribes among the Dalits, as more and more do, we will be up to nearly 25 percent of the population, or over a quarter of a billion people.⁴

Dalits belong to a fifth category of castes or communities excluded from the traditional four-*varna* caste system.⁵ When we look at their treatment it is strikingly comparable to the criminalized status of similarly stigmatized groups around the world: the Burakumin in Japan, the Roma (and earlier the Jews) of Europe, and Blacks in the United States (Thorat, 2009). They are segregated, denied equitable access to health care, employment, education, economic advancement and so digital technology.

Most of the time when we think about the Digital Divide we are considering issues of class from the perspective of the upper end of scale and read

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