

## **DIGITAL DREAMS: PATHWAYS TO DIGITAL EMPOWERMENT FOR MARGINALISED GROUPS IN INDIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In today's evolving digital landscape, the concept of invisible labour has emerged as a significant yet underexplored issue, especially within marginalised communities. This research, grounded in a sociological framework, explores the social and cultural dynamics that perpetuate this phenomenon. While the digital economy has introduced new avenues for employment, systemic barriers continue to limit the participation and advancement of marginalised groups. Socio-economic inequalities and the persistent digital divide contribute to precarious work conditions and restricted career mobility. Gender-based disparities further intensify these challenges, with women remaining notably underrepresented in digital roles. These imbalances not only restrict equal access but also perpetuate structural disadvantages in securing stable, well-paying digital employment. Utilising case studies to demonstrate the broader effects of social inequality, the study investigates how such barriers impact job stability, upward mobility, and adaptability for disadvantaged workers. Furthermore, it assesses policy frameworks aimed at reducing discrimination and fostering inclusive, fair labour practices. The research ultimately underscores the need to transform the digital workspace into a more equitable and empowering environment—one that enables participation from all sectors of society and contributes to a more just digital future.

*Keywords- invisible labour, marginalised communities, digital workforce, digital divide, socio-economic inequality.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **MARGINALISED COMMUNITIES-**

Marginalised groups refer to sections of the population who face exclusion, discrimination, or restricted access to essential resources due to aspects such as ethnicity, caste, gender, socioeconomic status, or other identity-related factors. These communities often struggle to obtain fundamental opportunities and services, including quality education, healthcare, employment, and social recognition. Their marginalisation is rooted in long-standing historical, structural, and societal inequalities. Contributing factors include entrenched systems of oppression, deep-seated cultural biases, unequal power relations, economic imbalances, and resistance within society to meaningful social reform.

#### **DIGITAL DIVIDE**

The term *digital divide* describes the gap between individuals, communities, or nations in their ability to access and effectively use modern information and communication technologies (ICT). This disparity appears in multiple ways, such as:

1. The presence, reliability, and speed of internet connections
2. The availability of digital devices, including computers, tablets, and smartphones
3. The skills and confidence required to operate digital platforms and tools (digital literacy)
4. The quality of technological infrastructure, which often varies between rural and urban areas

This divide is closely linked to broader social, economic, and regional inequalities. It can limit access to education, employment opportunities, public services, and active engagement in the digital economy, thereby reinforcing existing patterns of disadvantage.

## **HINDERANCES FACED BY MARGINALISED COMMUNITIES**

### **1. Digital Disparity-**

The absence of affordable internet services and digital devices creates a major barrier for marginalised communities, preventing them from participating in the digital economy and accessing essential online resources. In many less developed areas, inadequate infrastructure results in slow or unreliable internet connectivity, further isolating these groups in the digital sphere. A lack of digital skills and training also hampers their ability to navigate online platforms effectively, restricting opportunities for employment, education, and social engagement. According to the *India Inequality Report 2022* and data from the *National Sample Survey Office (NSSO)*, only about one-fifth of India's population has the skills needed to use the internet or operate a computer. Among the lowest 20% of households by income, merely 2.7% own a computer. Additionally, there are still 25,607 villages in the country without any mobile or internet connectivity. While 66% of urban households have internet access, only 24% of rural households do. In terms of regular internet use, the figures drop to 14% for rural residents compared to 59% for those in urban areas. The situation was particularly severe for children with disabilities during the pandemic, with 56.5% encountering difficulties in attending online classes. Among Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) households, only 4% possessed the necessary digital resources for remote education.

- 2. Bias and Discrimination-** Biases built into hiring technologies and recruitment practices often advantage candidates from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, placing individuals from marginalised communities at a disadvantage. Even when they secure employment, many encounter both subtle and overt forms of workplace discrimination—ranging from stereotypes and microaggressions to exclusion from key decision-making roles. Pay gaps remain a persistent issue, with members of marginalised groups often receiving lower wages than others performing the same work. According to the *Deloitte Global Women at Work 2022* report, nearly six in ten women in professional settings have faced microaggressions, including condescending behaviour, mansplaining, or dismissive gestures.

- 3. Cultural and Linguistic Challenges-** In many rural areas, prevailing cultural expectations often limit women's participation in digital employment or remote work opportunities. Language barriers also pose significant challenges for non-native speakers, affecting their ability to communicate effectively, lowering their confidence, and restricting their engagement in the digital space. The limited availability of online resources in regional and minority languages further hinders these communities from accessing virtual education and employment prospects. Data from the *National Sample Survey Office (NSSO)* shows that during the COVID-19 pandemic, only 4% of Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) households possessed the technological means to sustain regular online learning—underscoring the depth of the digital divide.
- 4. Online Harassment and Safety Risks-** Marginalised communities—especially women and individuals from lower castes—are at heightened risk of facing abuse and harassment in online spaces. Limited knowledge of digital safety practices and insufficient awareness of cybersecurity make them vulnerable to threats such as identity theft, online fraud, and various forms of harassment. These risks often discourage them from engaging actively in the digital sphere. According to a 2020 *Truecaller* survey titled *The Impact of Harassment Calls and SMS on Women in India*, one in five women reported experiencing digital harassment through unwanted calls or messages.
- 5. Geographical Regions with High Digital Inequality in India- Rural and Remote Regions:** States such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh have vast rural populations with very limited access to the internet, digital devices, and reliable IT infrastructure. **Northeastern States:** Areas like Nagaland, Mizoram, and Arunachal Pradesh face unique barriers stemming from geographic isolation and the predominance of indigenous communities. These challenges are compounded by inadequate educational facilities and underdeveloped technological infrastructure. **Urban Slums and Low-Income Settlements:** Even in major metropolitan centres such as Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, and Chennai, large sections of the population—particularly migrants, daily wage earners, and marginalised caste groups—struggle to secure access to digital tools or employment opportunities due to financial hardship and entrenched social exclusion.

## CASE STUDY

**Gender-Based Discrimination at Foxconn's iPhone Manufacturing Facility in India (2024)-** Foxconn, a leading Taiwanese electronics manufacturing giant and one of

Apple's major suppliers, came under intense scrutiny in 2024 for discriminatory hiring practices at its iPhone assembly unit in Sriperumbudur, Tamil Nadu. The controversy centred on the systematic exclusion of married women from employment opportunities—highlighting deeper structural biases within India's manufacturing and digital workforce. Investigations revealed that recruitment agents were intentionally avoiding married women during hiring processes. These decisions were allegedly based on assumptions that married women are more likely to be absent from work due to domestic responsibilities, pregnancy, or childcare, reflecting deeply rooted gender and cultural stereotypes.

**Consequences for Women- Loss of Economic Opportunity:** The deliberate exclusion of married women from such jobs deprived a significant section of Tamil Nadu's female population of stable employment, critical in a region where industrial jobs are vital for women's economic advancement. **Reinforcement of Gender Roles:** These discriminatory actions added to the dual pressure of societal expectations and systemic inequality, stifling both financial independence and professional growth for women in the workforce.

**Institutional and Political Response-** Following media exposés and public criticism, the issue drew attention from several advocacy groups and political entities. The women's wing of the ruling party strongly condemned the discriminatory practices, demanding a thorough investigation and enforcement of fair employment norms. In response, Foxconn issued a directive to its hiring partners, mandating the removal of gender, marital status, and age criteria from job postings—marking a shift toward more inclusive recruitment protocols.

**Measures Taken and Future Strategies- Foxconn's Initiatives:** The company pledged to revise its recruitment guidelines and launched sensitivity training for HR staff and recruitment partners to promote gender equity and eliminate bias. **Governmental Action:** The Tamil Nadu state government committed to conducting audits across sectors to examine hiring policies and ensure alignment with anti-discrimination legislation. Additionally, the need for a stronger legal infrastructure to address workplace discrimination was emphasised.

## **POLICIES IMPLEMENTED BY THE GOVERNMENT**

- 1. SCHEDULED CASTE SUB PLAN-** Introduced in 1979 during India's Fifth Five-Year Plan, the Scheduled Castes Sub Plan was designed to promote balanced socio-economic development for communities classified as Scheduled Castes (SCs). Under this framework, both central and state government departments are required to allocate a share of their budget in proportion to the SC population, specifically for initiatives that address their developmental needs. The scheme prioritises improving access to fundamental services such as healthcare, education, housing, and employment opportunities. By directly targeting these areas, the SCSP aims to reduce long-standing disparities and promote social inclusion, serving as an example of planning that takes into account the historical disadvantages faced by marginalised caste groups.
- 2. TRIBAL SUB PLAN-** Established in 1974 by the Planning Commission of India, the Tribal Sub Plan was created to improve the living standards and socio-economic status of communities classified as Scheduled Tribes (STs). Similar to the Scheduled Castes Sub

Plan, this approach mandates that a portion of government budgets be earmarked specifically for tribal development—particularly in areas where tribal populations constitute more than half of the total population. The TSP emphasises integrated growth by expanding access to education, healthcare services, housing, and livelihood opportunities. Alongside economic measures, it also promotes the preservation of tribal heritage and cultural identity, ensuring that integration into mainstream society does not come at the expense of indigenous traditions. The policy aims to counter the long-standing marginalisation of tribal communities, much of which stems from geographical remoteness and persistent institutional neglect.

3. **PRADHAN MANTRI JAN DHAN YOJANA-** Launched on 28 August 2014 as a nationwide initiative for financial inclusion, the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana seeks to bring banking facilities within the reach of individuals who have traditionally been excluded from the formal financial system, particularly those in rural areas and marginalised communities. The scheme enables people to open savings accounts without the requirement of a minimum balance, while also providing access to services such as debit cards, insurance coverage, and overdraft options. By integrating these accounts with Aadhaar identification and mobile connectivity, the programme facilitates direct benefit transfers, thereby improving efficiency, reducing leakages, and increasing transparency in welfare disbursements. Over the years, PMJDY has become a key instrument in connecting low-income households to mainstream banking channels.
4. **PRADHAN MANTRI GRAMIN DIGITAL SAKSHARTA ABHIYAN-** As part of the Digital India programme, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology launched the Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyan in February 2017 to expand digital literacy in rural parts of India. The scheme's primary objective is to ensure that at least one person in every qualifying household—particularly from the Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST), women, and below poverty line (BPL) categories—acquires the ability to use computers, smartphones, and the internet confidently. Participants are trained in essential skills such as operating basic software, utilising online public services, making digital payments, and practising cyber safety. By narrowing the digital skills gap, PMGDISHA helps marginalised families access modern services, engage with online platforms, and participate more actively in the evolving digital economy.

5. **STAND UP INDIA SCHEME**- Introduced on 5 April 2016 by the Ministry of Finance, the Stand-Up India Scheme was designed to foster entrepreneurship within marginalised groups, particularly Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and women. Under this programme, each bank branch is expected to extend at least one loan to a woman entrepreneur and one to an SC or ST entrepreneur, specifically for establishing new ventures, often referred to as greenfield projects. The financial assistance offered ranges from ₹10 lakh to ₹1 crore. In addition to funding, the scheme offers guidance, capacity-building workshops, and mentorship to help beneficiaries navigate the business landscape. By enabling access to capital and entrepreneurial support, Stand-Up India plays a crucial role in reducing economic inequalities and creating visible success stories within underrepresented communities.
6. **NATIONAL RURAL LIVELIHOOD MISSION**- Launched in June 2011 by the Ministry of Rural Development and later renamed **Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana**, the National Rural Livelihood Mission seeks to combat rural poverty by empowering poor households—particularly women from marginalised backgrounds—through community-based institutions. The programme encourages the creation of Self-Help Groups (SHGs), improves access to affordable credit, and offers skill development initiatives aimed at building sustainable income sources. Special emphasis is placed on including Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and other socially disadvantaged sections, fostering both economic security and social empowerment. Over time, NRLM has contributed to reshaping rural socio-economic dynamics, enabling women to gain financial autonomy and collective bargaining power.
7. **POST MATRIC SCHOLARSHIP SCHEMES**- First introduced in the 1950s and revised several times since, the Post-Matric Scholarship Schemes are implemented by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment along with the Ministry of Minority Affairs. These initiatives provide financial aid to students from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backwards Classes, and minority communities who are enrolled in courses beyond the secondary level. The support includes coverage for tuition fees, hostel charges, and a maintenance allowance. By easing the economic burden on families, these scholarships help lower dropout rates and expand access to higher education for disadvantaged groups, thereby promoting academic achievement and social mobility.

8. **NATIONAL ACTION PLAN FOR SKILL DEVELOPMENT WITH DISABILITIES-** In 2015, the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship rolled out a nationwide programme to enhance employability among individuals with physical or mental disabilities. Rather than following a one-size-fits-all model, the plan adapts training content and delivery to match specific functional abilities. Facilities are designed for easy access, trainers are prepared to work with diverse needs, and support continues after training through help in securing jobs or starting small businesses. The initiative aims not only to boost income opportunities but also to dismantle long-standing barriers, enabling persons with disabilities to participate fully in economic and community life.
9. **SC/ST ACT-** Introduced in 1989 under the Ministry of Home Affairs, this legislation was created to safeguard members of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes from targeted violence, discrimination, and social exclusion. It covers a spectrum of offences from verbal abuse, physical assault, and sexual violence to denial of basic rights such as entry into public spaces, access to resources, or use of communal property. To ensure justice is not delayed, the Act authorises special courts for expedited hearings and includes measures for victim and witness protection. It remains a crucial legal safeguard for protecting the dignity, safety, and equal status of communities historically subjected to systemic oppression.
10. **PRADHAN MANTRI ADARSH GRAM YOJANA-** Launched in 2009 by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, this initiative aims to convert villages with a Scheduled Caste population exceeding 50% into model villages. The program focuses on enhancing essential infrastructure, promoting quality education, improving sanitation and healthcare, and creating sustainable livelihood opportunities. By integrating and aligning resources from various government schemes, PMAGY adopts a holistic approach to rural development. Its core objective is to ensure social equity and reduce caste-based disparities by directing targeted support to SC-majority villages.

## **GRASSROOT INITIATIVES AND NGOS BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE**

1. **Barefoot College – Women Empowerment Through Solar Energy (2022)**  
Barefoot College, a pioneering grassroots organisation, has significantly contributed to empowering rural women by training them as solar engineers. In 2022, the program expanded its scope to reach deeper into marginalised communities across states like Rajasthan and Odisha, as well as in African countries. The initiative identifies women

from off-grid villages and equips them with practical knowledge of solar energy systems, enabling them to generate electricity for their communities. These women, affectionately referred to as "Solar Mamas," become change-makers in their regions. One such example is Sharda Devi from Rajasthan, who, after receiving training, now oversees the solar infrastructure of her village. Her work not only provides her with a steady income but also makes her community energy-resilient.

## 2. **NASSCOM Foundation – Digital Inclusion for Persons with Disabilities (2023)**

In 2023, the NASSCOM Foundation launched a specialised program to strengthen digital competencies among persons with disabilities. Partnering with major corporate entities, the initiative developed accessible training content and employment pathways suited to diverse disability needs. Over 500 participants benefited, acquiring practical, industry-relevant digital skills. Around three-fourths of them secured jobs or freelance work in areas such as web development, digital marketing, and content creation. One example is Vikram, a visually impaired individual from Delhi, who completed the program and now works as a web developer in a technology company, supporting his family's income.

## 3. **Gram Vikas – Digital Tools for Tribal Empowerment (2023)**

Gram Vikas, an NGO operating in Odisha, launched a campaign in 2023 aimed at digitally empowering tribal communities. Through the establishment of digital literacy centres in remote tribal regions, the initiative trained local youth in using smartphones, accessing online education platforms, and engaging in e-commerce. These efforts allowed community members to explore economic opportunities beyond traditional livelihoods. Dilip, a tribal youth from Odisha, utilised this training to start an e-commerce venture selling handmade local crafts. His business has expanded significantly, and he now caters to international buyers, bringing recognition and income to his community.

## 4. **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 – Digital Learning for Inclusion**

The National Education Policy of 2020 brought a significant overhaul to India's education framework, with a strong focus on reducing learning disparities for disadvantaged groups. A key element of the policy is the integration of digital tools into regular education to ensure wider accessibility. It promotes platforms such as SWAYAM and DIKSHA, which offer free learning resources in multiple Indian languages, making them particularly beneficial for rural learners, tribal communities, and first-generation students. In addition, NEP 2020 encourages skill-based training programs that enable youth from marginalised backgrounds to gain competencies needed for active participation in the digital economy.

**PRIVATE SECTOR CONTRIBUTIONS-** Several major private-sector organisations, including Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), Infosys Foundation, Wipro, and Google India, have

initiated specialised programs to strengthen digital literacy among young people in rural and underprivileged regions. These programs aim to provide participants with essential technological skills required to succeed in an increasingly digital job market. Beyond skill development, such initiatives foster inclusivity, enhance workforce diversity, and contribute to reducing deep-rooted socio-economic disparities. Collectively, these corporate efforts are helping to build a more equitable and accessible digital landscape in the country.

**STRATEGIES-** Ensuring marginalised communities have equitable access to digital opportunities is crucial for building an inclusive, thriving, and future-ready workforce. Addressing the socio-economic and infrastructural barriers they face requires a multipronged approach. Below are key strategies that can help bridge these gaps:

- 1. Promoting Digital Literacy and Skill Development-** Launching targeted training programs for underrepresented groups can significantly enhance their digital competencies. This can involve coding workshops, online learning platforms, and collaborations with local institutions or NGOs. Making these programs affordable or subsidised is essential to maximise participation. Public-private partnerships can be leveraged to make digital education more accessible.
- 2. Improving Access to Technology-** Affordable and reliable access to digital devices and internet connectivity remains a major challenge. This can be addressed through government subsidies, collaborations with tech companies, or grassroots programs. Establishing community digital centres—equipped with computers, internet access, and training facilities—can provide local access points, especially in underserved regions.
- 3. Encouraging Inclusive Hiring Practices-** Organisations must adopt inclusive recruitment strategies that prioritise diversity. This can be done by partnering with agencies that specialise in placing individuals from marginalised backgrounds, including women, LGBTQ+ persons, people of colour, and individuals with disabilities. Creating bias-free hiring processes and dedicated job portals for these communities can ensure equal employment opportunities.
- 4. Strengthening Mentorship and Networking Opportunities-** Mentorship programs connecting marginalised individuals with experienced professionals can play a transformative role. Such support offers career guidance, professional insights, and valuable industry connections. Hosting inclusive networking events—both online and offline—can enhance career visibility and build community support systems.
- 5. Supporting Marginalised Entrepreneurs-** Access to capital and resources is essential for nurturing entrepreneurship in underserved communities. Government schemes, diversity-focused venture capital funds, and social impact investors can provide financial

backing. These resources help empower entrepreneurs from disadvantaged backgrounds to launch and sustain digital ventures.

6. **Ensuring Inclusion and Retention in the Workplace-** Organisations must not only focus on hiring but also on retaining diverse talent. Implementing inclusive workplace policies and establishing Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) can create safe spaces for sharing experiences, building community, and advocating for necessary changes. These practices foster belonging and equity in the digital workforce.
7. **Combating Discrimination and Harassment-** Companies need clear and enforceable anti-discrimination and anti-harassment policies that protect marginalised workers, both in physical and remote environments. Creating safe reporting mechanisms and ensuring accountability is key to building trust and security in the workplace.
8. **Promoting Visibility and Representation-** Media campaigns, recruitment materials, and organisational leadership should reflect the diversity of the population. When marginalised individuals see themselves represented, it reinforces their place and potential in the digital ecosystem. Increasing representation in leadership and decision-making roles is critical to systemic change.

**FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS-** To further strengthen inclusion efforts and narrow the digital divide, the following recommendations are essential:

1. **Expand Digital Infrastructure in Rural and Remote Areas-** Improving internet connectivity and digital services in underserved regions should be a top government priority. This would open doors to online education, remote employment, and entrepreneurial ventures.
2. **Develop Localised Digital Literacy Programs-** Digital training should be offered in regional languages and tailored to community-specific needs—such as programs for farmers, women, and persons with disabilities—to make learning more relatable and effective.
3. **Integrate Digital Education into School Curricula-** Introducing subjects like coding, cybersecurity, and data literacy at the school level ensures that future generations, including those from marginalised backgrounds, are digitally ready from an early age.
4. **Launch Gender-Focused Training Initiatives-** Specialised digital skills programs for women, especially in rural settings, are necessary to address gender disparities. Fields like data science, digital marketing, and IT offer valuable career paths and economic independence.

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**CONCLUSION-** Despite notable advancements in building a digitally inclusive economy, systemic barriers continue to restrict marginalised communities from fully participating in India's digital transformation. Challenges such as limited digital literacy, poor infrastructure, and unequal access to opportunities remain prevalent—particularly for women, rural populations, and socially disadvantaged groups. The study highlights the need for targeted strategies such as strengthening infrastructure, localising digital training, and prioritising inclusion in education and employment. Government programs like **Digital India, Skill India**, and women's entrepreneurship initiatives offer a foundation, but more community-specific and intersectional approaches are needed. Inclusion must consider overlapping factors like caste, gender, and disability to create a truly equitable digital landscape. By integrating digital skills into early education, supporting remote work, offering mentorship, and fostering inclusive workplaces, India can bridge the digital divide. Ensuring that no community is excluded from digital opportunities will not only empower individuals but also enhance national progress. For India to thrive in the global digital economy, every citizen must be included in its digital future.

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