

## **BOOK OF ABSTRACTS**

### **2025 AWL Humanities Initiative (HI) Annual Symposium** **'Digital Inequalities and the Question of Global South'**

**28 - 29 August 2025**

**IIIT Delhi**

#### **Keynote Panel- Southern Imaginations of digital futures**

Moderator : Professor Amrit Srinivasan, Retired Professor, Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, IIT Delhi

Speakers : Dr Sandeep Mertia, Assistant Professor, Science and Technology Studies (STS) in the School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences at the Stevens Institute of Technology & Dr Deepak Prince, Assistant Professor, Department of Social Sciences and Humanities, IIIT Delhi

Respondent : Professor Arjun Appadurai, Professor Emeritus, Media, Culture, and Communication, New York University

Our global present is arguably being shaped more with the work of imagination, anticipation, and speculation than ever before in human history. We propose in this panel to examine the key problem of this symposium - digital inequality, with reference to 'future' as a problem of collective imagination. Inequality has been a critical issue for global and national projects of development. Given the centrality of digital technologies in the current paradigms of socio-economic development and popular culture, we focus on understanding how the questions of growing inequality are mediated and governed by how we imagine our digital futures. The challenge of imagining less unequal futures must also contend with past strategies of development, which for various reasons have failed to achieve formerly imagined futures of equity and prosperity. With these lessons from history on the one hand, and the promise of new technological futures on the other, this panel seeks to rethink the spatiotemporal and political constitution of technofuturity.

**Dr Hemangini Gupta, University of Edinburgh**

**Experimental Times: Rethinking Startup Capitalism from the South**

Globally, new worlds of startup capitalism are thought to blur the boundaries between work and life as workers are exhorted to "Do What You Love" and embrace entrepreneurialism in all

aspects of their life. In this talk, I draw on ethnographic research in Bangalore/Bengaluru, India, to examine the rapid spatial and temporal expansion of work. While management discourses offer the promise of passion-driven work as leading to a more fulfilling and pleasurable future, workers here resist the imperative to imagine work as love. Instead, their place in the city as migrant subjects serves to diffract love into a broader affective life of startup capitalism, manifesting as care, friendship, and happiness. These affective registers are vital forms of social reproduction through which migrant workers replenish and sustain themselves amidst precarious automatable jobs. Thus, while startup capitalism is often associated with the production of the individualized and empowered subject, within the digital geographies of the South it also offers unexpected pathways to queer the idea of the “family” and offer work as a practice of friendship and regeneration.

**Vandana Attri, Centre for Study of Law and Governance, Jawaharlal Nehru University**

***The Rise Of Virtual Courts And Digital Inequalities: A Socio-Legal Study From New Delhi, India***

The courtroom once echoed of legal arguments within grand halls with physical presence of litigants, lawyers and judges is undergoing a radical transformation. The rise of virtual hearings, live-streaming of judicial proceedings, and e-filing systems is reshaping how courts function, how litigants access courts, and how legal systems respond to the demands of a digital society. Digitalization of courts was introduced to enhance access to justice to litigants, efficiency and transparency of justice delivery. However, in the Global South, particularly in India, the transformation from traditional courtrooms to virtual hearings reveals complex issue of digital inequalities embedded within socio-legal landscape.

**Nikhil Agarwal, University of California, Los Angeles**

***Seeds of hope, fruits of failure: Scaling climate-smart agriculture in India.***

Since 2015, when the Paris Agreement was adopted, agriculture has gained increased prominence in global climate negotiations, both as a source of greenhouse gas emissions and for its potential to reduce them through carbon storage and sequestration. In the past decade, hundreds of agriculture technology (agtech) start-ups have emerged, promising to design and scale “climate-smart agriculture” (CSA) solutions. India has become a significant destination for investments in these start-ups, offering a unique vantage point to examine their impacts. This talk traces how aspirations to address the ecological crisis urgently and at scale intersect with the complex environmental, social, economic, political, and cultural relationships that shape agriculture. Alternate Wetting and Drying (AWD) of rice fields, a technique aimed at mitigating emissions by killing methanogenic soil bacteria, has gained traction among tech-entrepreneurs as a key CSA program for emissions reduction. Based on institutional ethnography of an AWD

program at an Indian agtech start-up, this presentation examines why and how technological interventions like AWD consistently face challenges, often fail, and yet continue to reappear. What drives their persistence despite repeated failures on the ground? How are these tied to the financing and scaling models of climate-smart technologies? By addressing these questions, the talk highlights the tensions and contradictions at the heart of scaling climate-smart agriculture and their implications for addressing the intertwined crises of climate change and agriculture.

**Jiffin George, Lincoln University College, Malaysia**

***Digital Literacy And Communication As Catalysts For Knowledge Transfer And Innovation In The Smallholder Agricultural Sector: A Comparative Analysis Of India And Malaysia***

This paper investigates the role of digital literacy and communication in fostering knowledge transfer and innovation among smallholder farmers in India and Malaysia. While digital transformation promises widespread access, our analysis reveals that persistent digital and literacy divides significantly impede its full realization, particularly within marginalized farming communities. We examine how farmers acquire and utilize digital capital—encompassing access, skills, and strategic use of tools—for critical agricultural functions like learning, accessing information, market linkages, and improving farming practices. Despite observed increases in productivity and income for digitally engaged farmers, the equitable distribution of benefits remains a challenge, often exacerbating existing socio-economic inequalities. The study also highlights how unique socio-economic, cultural, and political contexts in each country influence digital adoption and its impact. Synthesized findings, based on hypothetical data, indicate varying access and usage rates and reveal tangible impacts primarily in information access and market transparency. However, challenges like digital illiteracy and unreliable connectivity continue to hinder widespread, equitable transformation, underscoring the need for context-specific, inclusive strategies.

**Rajiv Nanda & Dr. Aakansha Natani, Human Sciences Research Centre, IIIT Hyderabad**

***Cross-Border Data Flows & Structural Dependencies In The Global Data Economy***

Data has emerged as one of the most valuable assets in the 21st century, with the digital economy fundamentally reshaping global economic relations. As data flows across borders become increasingly critical, governments are faced with the challenge of governing these flows while maximizing their economic and strategic benefits, which are largely realised by the free flow of data. To understand these dynamics, this paper applies dependency theory (Wallerstein, 1975; Dos Santos, 1970) as an analytical framework. This theory proposes three distinct categories of actors in the global economy: the core, periphery and semi-periphery. Originally

developed to analyse colonial and post-colonial economic relationships, this theory can be used to examine how contemporary data governance may perpetuate global inequalities through new mechanisms of structural dependency.

In this paper, we extend the dependency theory framework to the global data economy by analysing the evolving characteristics of the participating actors. Countries that control key technological infrastructure, set global standards, and capture the majority of economic value from data flows through their dominance of digital ecosystems can be characterised as the ‘core’. Countries which serve as data sources, with limited domestic technological capabilities and minimal value capture from their own data generation, would be considered the ‘periphery’. On the other hand, countries that are able to maintain a strategic and dynamic trade and regulatory positioning, exhibit selective participation, and have growing indigenous technological capabilities would form the ‘semi-periphery’.

We also analyse case studies of some specific countries to locate their positioning within this classification using dependency theory. We examine the United States, China and the EU as displaying core characteristics due to their market dominance, state-led domestic digital development, and extraterritorial regulatory scope respectively. For the semi-periphery, we look to India, Brazil and Kenya for their selective participation, growing indigenous digital platforms, and increasing regional influence. Finally, we observe peripheral characteristics in Nigeria, Vietnam and Mexico, which have a strong presence of foreign players in their domestic markets and limited value capture from their own data generation.

Through this analysis, we highlight evolving patterns and enablers of inequalities in the global digital economy.

**Dr. Suruchi Kumari, Varun Ramdas and Megha Garg, Digital Empowerment Foundation**

*Governing Public AI: Private Infrastructure, Public Investments, Public Purpose, And Policy Gaps*

Governments worldwide are organising public service delivery through and around digital technologies. This move towards digitisation has also meant greater reliance on artificial intelligence over human decision-making systems. States directly collaborate with the private sector to build public-facing AI infrastructure and indirectly support private-owned AI systems in public functions, raising urgent questions about the responsibilities of the welfare state when they use technology. This dual dynamic—private ownership coupled with government support in the form of both financial and non-financial resources—is especially relevant in the Global South context, as the technology holds the potential of unique advantages like bridging the digital divide. However, this raises urgent questions about the state’s responsibility towards providing societal access to benefits and addressing risks associated with privacy, bias and

algorithmic discrimination, and diminished human autonomy. Our inquiry examines when, how, and what elements of AI technologies can be treated as public goods. We draw upon literature and frameworks for the conceptualisation of public goods, tracing its evolution from neo-classical theory to social constructions. We also discuss contemporary initiatives that analyse AI as a public good and conclude with a call for more research into potential mechanisms for public oversight, accountability, and citizen recourse in the public good framing of AI.

**Kalpendra Singh, Department of Political Science, University of Lucknow**

*Digital Geopolitics And Inequality: India's Role In Bridging The Digital Divide In The Global South*

In the evolving architecture of twenty-first-century geopolitics, digital technologies have emerged not merely as instruments of progress but as foundational determinants of global power and exclusion. As algorithmic governance, data sovereignty, and digital infrastructure redefine the contours of influence, the Global South finds itself caught in a structural bind for aspiring to digital inclusion while grappling with inherited asymmetries of access, agency, and autonomy (AAA). This paper interrogates this complex matrix of digital inequality through a critical examination of India's evolving role, positioning it as Vishwa Guru. India's position within the global digital landscape is characterised by domestic initiatives such as Aadhaar, UPI, and the India Stack, which exemplify a concerted strategy to engineer a scalable digital public infrastructure—one that is increasingly recognised as a template for emerging economies. India's model of digital innovation, widely acclaimed in policy and development circles, has captured the interest of global institutions of governance and countries across the world.

Concurrently, India's diplomatic engagements, manifested through its proactive role in the G20, deepening South-South cooperation, and advocacy for a universally inclusive digital compact, underscore its evolving identity as both a bridge-builder and a Vishwa Guru. In navigating the tensions between digitally hegemonic powers and states aspiring for technological sovereignty, India seeks to shape a more equitable global digital order, even as it negotiates the complexities inherent in this intermediary role. This paper argues that if India is to truly fulfil its role as a Vishwa Guru then it must embrace a value-driven foreign policy framework that centres digital equity as a core strategic objective. This entails moving beyond transactional diplomacy and towards an internationalist ethic that treats digital justice not as a favour bestowed, but as a shared imperative. By foregrounding inclusion, transparency, and technological sovereignty, India has the potential to offer an alternative to both Western techno-liberalism and authoritarian techno-nationalism.

**Surabhi Baijal, Ambedkar University, Delhi**

## *Refusing The Archive: The Sentinelese, The Shompen, And The Digital Logics Of Erasure In The Global South*

As digital infrastructures increasingly shape how states govern, extract, and represent life in the Global South, absence from the digital sphere is often read as marginality or underdevelopment. This paper challenges that assumption by focusing on two Indigenous communities in the Indian Ocean—the Sentinelese and the Shompen of Nicobar—who remain largely uncontacted, undocumented, and digitally unincorporated. In the dominant frameworks of digital modernity, such refusal of visibility is cast as a problem to be solved through connectivity, datafication, and integration. However, this paper argues that the deliberate opacity and sustained silence of these communities represent a radical epistemic position: a rejection of extractive development, colonial knowledge production, and the very infrastructures that render populations digitally legible.

The Sentinelese have long defied all attempts at contact, surveillance, and incorporation into the Indian state. Their resistance, most famously marked by their rejection of missionary outreach in 2018, is often framed in the media and policy discourse as primitive isolationism. Similarly, the Shompen, a forest-dwelling and semi-nomadic group on Great Nicobar Island, are imperilled by the Indian government's Indo-Pacific infrastructural ambitions—specifically the proposed Galathea Bay transshipment port, which is embedded within broader digital and strategic mapping initiatives. Despite their legal protections, both communities are continuously reinscribed in state and media narratives as blank spaces to be mapped, modernised, and assimilated.

Drawing on Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence and critical frameworks in decolonial anthropology, this paper explores how Indigenous refusal intersects with digital inequality—not as a lack, but as a conscious disengagement from the technocratic apparatuses that drive ruination in the name of progress. It critiques the underlying assumption that access to ICTs, biometric systems, or digital archives automatically equates to empowerment. Instead, it asks: Who decides what counts as meaningful participation in a digital society? What are the implications of resisting the very infrastructure that undergirds development, surveillance, and memory?

Public history, too, is complicit in these dynamics. The pressure to record, narrate, and circulate Indigenous stories through digital means risks reinscribing extractive logics—especially when the communities in question have not consented to such representation. In response, the paper calls for a rethinking of digital justice in the Global South: one that honours unknowability, refrains from epistemic conquest, and sees non-participation not as passivity, but as a powerful assertion of sovereignty.

By examining the Sentinelese and Shompen as co-authors of a radical silence—not mere absences in the digital matrix—this paper reframes digital inequality as a deeply political terrain. It challenges the idea that justice must always be visible, mappable, or archived. In the ruins of neocolonial developmentalism, it argues, the refusal to be seen may be the most urgent form of dissent.

**Anup Mishra, IIT Gandhinagar**

***Meta's Role In Shaping Extreme Digital Identity Practices Among Indian Youth: A Case Study Of Instagram***

This paper critically examines Instagram's roles in developing digital identity practices among Indian youths, contextualizing debates on digital colonialism, algorithmic bias, and the power of global digital platforms. In 2016, Free Basics was rejected by the Indian government over concerns of a threat to net neutrality. Even though digital platforms act as subtle gateways for producing similar content and control through algorithmic curation, through the analysis of personalized feeds, aesthetic filters, suggestion and recommendation systems, digital life, and subculture consumption, identity bubbles are nurtured. The paper highlights how digital platforms like Instagram inspire exclusionary and extreme identity practices, fostering radical imaginaries. Grounded in Couldry and Mejias' "cost of connection," Kwet's "digital colonialism," and studies on digital radicalism and practices, this paper studies Instagram as an ideological apparatus. It employs a netnography methodology to examine digital practices across age, gender, and educational background. By inquiring into digital monopolies, this paper contributes to the broader debate on digital inequalities in the Global South, questioning whether Instagram is now developing into the new face of extreme digital identity formation among Indian users, and how it is expanding towards the threat of digital colonialism through algorithm design and the mass production of biased content.

**Md Yousuf Kamal, DHI University, Kerala**

***Digital Bhakts And Algorithmic Democracies- Fan Culture, Media Polarization, And Online Inequality In India***

This paper examines the formation of 'digital bhakts'—users whose political identity is shaped by loyalty, repetition, and algorithmic amplification—within India's evolving digital public sphere. Far from being deepened by expanded access, democratic participation is increasingly marked by media polarization, cognitive digital divides, and epistemic inequality.

The paper situates these dynamics within debates on data colonialism, platform capitalism, and the notion of the Global South 2.0: not as digitally underdeveloped, but as differently digitized

spaces where hyper-connectivity coexists with knowledge asymmetry, algorithmic populism, and narrative fragmentation. Drawing on media analysis, platform ethnography, and discourse studies, the study analyzes how fan culture, partisan influencers, IT cells, and news platforms mobilize affect, misinformation, and digital spectacle across YouTube, X (Twitter), Facebook, and WhatsApp.

Case material—including hashtags (#ModiHaiToMumkinHai), meme circulation, WhatsApp University forwards, influencer-driven satire (The Deshbhakt), and fact-checking archives (Alt News)—shows how repetitive messaging and emotional intensity engineer ideological conformity and reinforce polarized online identities. Platforms, through extractive and monetized logics, reward visibility, outrage, and fandom over deliberation, accuracy, and inclusive dialogue.

By combining empirical mapping with theoretical reflection, the paper argues that digital access does not equate to digital empowerment. For marginalized communities in India—particularly rural, caste-oppressed, and minority groups—participation often remains limited to consumption rather than critique or creation, widening the democratic and epistemic divides.

The paper concludes by calling for a critical rethinking of digital citizenship in the Global South, emphasizing the need for localized media literacy frameworks, algorithmic accountability, and participatory infrastructures. Without these interventions, the promise of digital democratization risks collapsing into a spectacle of misinformed populism, delaying broader goals of justice, inclusivity, and even the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

**U. Sai Sruti and Himanqi Patnaik, Jamia Millia Islamia**

### **Performing Class Online: Aesthetic Faultlines In The Tiktok-Instagram Divide In India**

In today's world, social media acts as one of the primary mediums for one's creative expression, especially through short-form videos used for memes, dance and music trends, and so on. When investigating questions around digital inequalities, it becomes imperative to not only look at access to technology but also the varying degrees of the quality of the usage of it. Prior to the ban, TikTok in India acted as a platform for users primarily from non-metropolitan, lower-income and non-English-speaking backgrounds for creative expression, which constituted a digital vernacular space and was more suggestive of a democratic digital public sphere than the Instagram Reel platform, which was to become the next possible alternative post the ban. In contrast, Instagram Reel came up favouring a sanitized kind of aesthetic, which is "aspirational", polished, fluent in English, and reflects the tastes of India's upper castes and upper-middle classes, desiring cosmopolitan sensibilities. Reels promoting this middle-upper class cultural capital create the aesthetic distinction which becomes a boundary of social exclusion. This paper seeks to interrogate this classed politics of platform aesthetics, which are never neutral but



instead deeply political and curated, and questions the idea of what is “good” content and the act of deeming certain expressions as “cringe”, influenced by social hierarchies of caste and class which are reproduced in the digital space. Content marked as cringe is often ridiculed as vulgar, excessive, or lacking sophistication, reflecting a binary of high and low culture. Labelling certain expressions as cringe excludes marginalised communities from the domain of what is deemed as culturally valuable and worthy of visibility. Building on Antonio Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony, this paper argues that the aesthetic norms upheld by platforms like Instagram function as instruments through which dominant social groups maintain cultural and symbolic power. Gramsci’s notion of hegemony emphasizes how ruling classes establish their cultural values as the “common sense” of society, not primarily through overt coercion but through the systematic shaping of consent. Aesthetic standards thereby become a mechanism of social discipline of free expressions, naturalising elite cultural norms. The migration of former TikTok creators to Instagram after the platform’s ban demonstrates how subordinated groups often feel compelled to recalibrate their creative practices, adopting new visual styles, languages, and bodily comportments to align with the hegemonic aesthetic logic of Instagram. This process reflects not only adaptation but also the internalization of dominant cultural norms to accumulate digital cultural capital which conforms to the set standards. Within digital platforms, the prevailing aesthetic is heavily shaped by Western ideals of beauty, taste, and professionalism, which are often framed as universal standards. Consequently, visual styles influenced by Western norms, characterized by minimalism, cosmopolitan imagery, and high production values, are not only seen as desirable but are celebrated as markers of success and sophistication, even across the Global South. This dynamic elevates Western cultural codes as symbols of modernity and progress while marginalising local, vernacular, and subaltern forms of expression. Through this discussion, the central question remains—who gets to be visible, celebrated, or silenced in the digital public sphere?

**Prof Meera Chakravorty, Retired Prof., Jain University**

### ***Digital Inequalities And The Question Of The Global South: Harari’s Clarion Call***

In appreciating the AI’s role in everyday life, we often overlook its calculated failure to cater to the needs of many, including the poor, underprivileged, and marginalised individuals who are frequently the targets of discrimination in technological areas and, of course, in many other ways. However, in this reading of AI, we do not realise the dark side of AI’s involvement. The constant warning sounded by the renowned author Yuval Noah Harari, in this context, must be taken very seriously. AI may appear to be reshaping the present and future generations, and people may be delighted by the development all around, but beneath this so-called development lies a terrible and hidden danger that may eventually obliterate all progress. Without sounding fearful, what we must aim to do is evaluate the power and potency associated with AI. As Harari suggests, we should insist strongly that a mandatory regulation be strictly monitored, without

which an apocalypse might occur at any point in time. He has also stated that dataism blurs the difference between animals and machines. Therefore, it is not just digital inequalities that should concern us, but we also need to confront the potential danger and the havoc it might create for all, treating it as something imperative. It is not that the concern about the many inequalities that AI is involved in is less important, but it is overwhelming to comprehend that the designs that AI aims to implement in the name of transcending the issue of inequalities are incredibly challenging. AI's mode of communication may appear wonderful, and its amazing speed is faster than the conventional mode of communication, but what is it that pushes us to the brink of fear, which must be tackled before it is too late? I suppose it will be a Matrix-like context (Matrix, the movie, conveys the problem that Harari refers to as the terrifying situation) that would intend to enslave humankind beyond imagination. Hence, it is time to re-conceptualise the AI system and regulate its activities for the benefit of people, while conducting an in-depth analysis of the concerns of existence and exploring beyond the limitations of a Frankensteinian mode of communication. Otherwise, like the activities of the Deep State, the AI system would destabilise many nations and communities of people, not just making them homeless but eliminating civilisations. It is popularly believed that the internet allows freedom. However, it is high time now to interrogate the concept of freedom in this context. If history is the development of human consciousness, then it is imperative that human beings strive to reconsider and explore the avenues required to safeguard liberty and humanity through an inspiring way of redemption. Not only is this a question of social, cultural, and political concern, but it also needs to respond to the philosophical questions that might demand a phenomenological exploration. We must gear up for a dynamic approach, making it a mission that must be pursued with all sincerity.

**Sidharth Singh, University of Delhi**

*Disconnected Connectivities: Mapping Digital Inequality And Epistemic Marginalization In The Global South*

“Access to the internet is not a luxury, it is a necessity,” said Barack Obama, but as of 2023, over 2.6 billion people remain offline globally, 90% of whom reside in the Global South (ITU, 2023). This paradox of connectivity without inclusion forms the core concern of this paper, which investigates how digital inequality in the Global South manifests not only in terms of access but ideologically, empirically, and normatively. Focusing on three interrelated variables—digital inequality (access, device quality, usage intensity), marginalization of communities (by class, caste, gender), and epistemic injustice (exclusion from knowledge infrastructures and narratives)—the study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining large-scale secondary data from the ITU, GSMA, and World Bank with ethnographic insights from rural India, urban Nigeria, and Brazilian favelas.

Despite impressive growth—India, for instance, reached 759 million internet users in 2023 (TRAI), and Sub-Saharan Africa crossed 44% mobile internet penetration—usage remains unequal: only 25% of rural Indian women use the internet regularly, compared to 58% of urban

men. Moreover, the platforms that promise access also filter knowledge production through Western-centric algorithms and English-dominant content norms, marginalizing indigenous voices and reinforcing the digital divide as a democratic divide. An example from Kenya's informal settlements illustrates this vividly: while digital health apps proliferate, their usability remains skewed toward English-speaking urban users, excluding vast populations from access to life-saving information. Algorithmic biases exacerbate this exclusion by prioritizing commercial over local content, and visibility over context, deepening the ideological rift between producers and consumers of knowledge.

These epistemic gaps challenge the normative ideal of technology as a neutral equalizer and demand new frameworks of postcolonial technology and digital literacy that center marginalized communities and subaltern internet experiences. Addressing these challenges is also critical to achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), which are increasingly dependent on equitable digital infrastructure. This paper argues that the infrastructures of knowledge production are not passive carriers of data, but active gatekeepers of power and visibility in the digital age. Grounded in the frameworks of ICT and Development, Democratic Participation, and Knowledge Infrastructures, this research advocates a rethinking of digital policy and platform design that genuinely addresses the fractures of digital inequality.

**Aishwarya Prakash, Centre For Development Studies**

***Caste And The Third Digital Divide: Understanding Differential Digital Gains Among School Students In Varanasi***

Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, this study asks how digital spaces themselves may become new sites for the reproduction of existing social hierarchies. If cultural capital is understood as the familiarity with dominant cultural codes and the ability to navigate legitimised forms of knowledge and expression, then its digital manifestations may include the capacity to use digital platforms in socially valued ways, such as leveraging generative AI tools for academic or career purposes, or curating one's digital presence in ways that align with middle-class norms of success and aspiration.

By foregrounding caste within the discourse on digital inequality, this paper complicates the assumption that access to digital tools leads inevitably to empowerment or inclusion. It argues that digital platforms are embedded within social structures, and that their benefits are shaped by inherited dispositions, prior exposure, and normative judgments about appropriate use. This has implications for how schools and policymakers conceptualise digital literacy, and for the design of interventions aimed at bridging digital gaps.

**Shabnam Singla, IIT Gandhinagar**

## *What Counts As Knowledge? Digital Injustice And Epistemic Inequality In The Global South*

Conversations around digital inequality often focus on infrastructure, access, and literacy (UNESCO, 2021). While these are important, they do not fully explain why many users in the Global South remain marginalised within digital systems even after gaining access. In this paper, I argue that digital inequality is not only technical or economic, but also epistemic. It concerns whose knowledge is seen as valid, what forms of expression are recognised, and what users must do to be understood online.

Further, even digital activism is shaped by these pressures. For instance, African activists often adopt global human rights language to gain traction, even when their local frameworks for justice differ (Mutsvairo & Ragnedda, 2019). Their messages do get amplified due to the access to social media, but only after being translated into terms legible to platforms.

Through these illustrations, I show that digital access alone is not enough. The deeper divide lies in how technologies are used, who sets the terms, and whose knowledge is built into the algorithmic systems. Many users in the Global South face limits not only in connectivity but in how they can meaningfully participate due to language barriers, design norms, or fear of being misinterpreted.

Finally, I briefly examine regulatory measures like privacy protections (Citron & Solove, 2022), which may offer users more control, but they do not shift the deeper imbalance in recognition. True digital equity requires rethinking how legitimacy, knowledge, and participation are structured online through the lens of epistemic access.

I introduce the concept of epistemic burden to describe the effort individuals from marginalised communities must make to translate their experiences into dominant, institutionally legible terms. This burden is not a matter of miscommunication or digital skills, but of systems designed around normative frameworks that exclude other ways of knowing.

I illustrate this using examples from legal and medical settings. Consider queer asylum seekers from India. To gain protection, they are often required to describe their identities through terms like “coming out” or prove they are gay using texts or photos that match Western expectations. These frameworks treat sexuality as a fixed or monolithic identity expressed publicly. But in many Indian contexts, the experience of same-sex desire is shaped by caste, kinship, social pressure, and regional norms. Disclosure may be unsafe or even culturally irrelevant. Still, asylum systems recognise only those narratives that follow a familiar script or are legitimate enough to grant asylum (Rao, 2014; Gartner, 2015; Giametta, 2017). Similarly, trans people are often required to use binary or psychiatric categories to access medical care or legal identity, even when those terms do not reflect their lived realities (Serano, 2007; Jenkins, 2016). In both cases, institutional recognition depends on conformity to dominant epistemologies.

In digital spaces, this burden becomes sharper. Platforms are structured around dominant norms of visibility, emotion, and familiarity. While ICTs are promoted as tools for achieving Sustainable Development Goals (UNDP, 2020), they often reproduce global North-centric ideas of identity and legitimacy. Algorithms prioritise content that aligns with dominant cultural cues (Tufekci, 2015) while filtering out unfamiliar or complex voices. For instance, Noble (2018) shows that searches for “Black girls” often return hypersexualised results, reflecting how algorithmic systems reinforce racial and gender stereotypes.

**Aishwarya Saha and Krittika Samaddar, Jadavpur University**

*Whose Knowledge Counts? Digital Infrastructures And Epistemic Inequality*

In the 21st century digital era, infrastructures like Google, Wikipedia, and state databases like Aadhaar have come to be the primary source of knowledge. These systems play a key role in what information becomes visible, searchable, and legitimate. More than 60% of online content is English even though less than 20% of the world speaks it. Even within the Global South, there exist internal spaces that erase diversity. Internationally, India is often treated as a power in the Global South, often sidelining narratives of smaller countries like Nepal, Bangladesh, or Bhutan. Internally, the Aadhaar biometric system has excluded over 2.7 million people due to authentication failures.

This paper addresses the question of how digital systems like Google, Wikipedia, or even India’s Aadhaar define and propagate whose knowledge and identities are “valid,” and how these infrastructures prioritise Western narratives to set the Global default or create new forms of exclusion within the Global South itself.

This work contributes to scholarly research on digital colonialism, postcolonial theory, and critical data studies, highlighting how databases reproduce exclusions. This paper utilises insights from secondary literature with case illustrations while adopting a comparative lens between the Global level and the Global South.

**Pauline Awungshi, Institute for Social and Economic Change, Bengaluru**

*No Address, No Access: Aadhaar, Informality And The Invisible Infrastructures Of Digital Inclusion*

Across the Global South, digital infrastructures increasingly mediate access to essential services—banking, healthcare, welfare, and mobility. In India, the Aadhaar system sits at the center of this transformation, presented as a universal key to both state and private entitlements. Yet for those living in Delhi’s informal settlements, this promise of inclusion remains deeply uneven.

This paper examines how the absence of a legally recognised address excludes the urban poor from Aadhaar-linked services, even when biometric enrolment is complete. Drawing on reported cases and testimonies from Gyaspur Basti and Tughlakabad Bengali Basti, I show how residents are blocked from KYC updates, banking access, or ticket bookings because their homes are considered unmappable. These exclusions intensify after demolitions in 2023–24, when loss of documents and homes erased address-based recognition altogether.

I argue that these are not technological glitches but manifestations of historically rooted hierarchies of recognition. By engaging with scholarship on informality, infrastructural citizenship, and bureaucratic legibility, this paper hopes to reframe digital inequality as inseparable from spatial justice. It highlights how Aadhaar reveals the entanglement of digital infrastructures with material infrastructures, exclusionary state practices, and precarious forms of citizenship in the urban Global South.

