

# SOCIAL DIVIDE PERSISTS DIGITAL DIVIDE

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Social stigma, cultural differences, linguistic diversity, traditional practices, localised community beliefs & practices – all of them are hallmarks of India. In the middle of deep social & traditional practices, my experience with digital interventions, like digital literacy, digital infrastructure, digital adaptation, mobile usage, digital education & services have given telling tales that defies democratic character of digital access.

Few days back I was taking rounds of few of our digital resource centres located in Kanchipuram, the temple town, the silk city and the home of exotic Kanchipuram silk saree weavers. One centre is located in an organised KSP Nagar, a colony of a society of about 80 weavers households. Every weaver has one-room set with a handloom station, a kitchen, space for a bed etc. All houses are *pucca* with enough open space.

In the last couple of years the entire weavers colony of KSP Nagar in Kanchipuram has been converted into wifi zone, with almost all houses enjoying wireless node, enabling them to connect to the world. The digital resource centre and digital integration of weavers in this part of Kanchipuram is what we call as Kanchiloom; with an idea that this effort would create knowledge based society with no information asymmetry.

Incidentally, there are a few shacks that one would pass by while going to KSP Nagar weavers colony, almost just about 100-200 metres outside the periphery. 50-100 people live in those shacks & on the street – they are mostly nomadic.

I have been trying to ensure that our digital centre at KSP Nagar also extends digital literacy to the nomadic tribe children who live just outside their area of living. But in this visit, when I saw a large number of nomadic children playing and scribbling on a mat in open sun at 42 degree heat, I asked our team “why can't they come inside the society premise and avail the facilities of the digital centre inside KSP Nagar?”

I got a categorical answer that, “KSP Nagar weavers society does not allow them to come inside.” They further elaborated that actually the nomadic tribes have different social strata and the weavers inside society premise have another. Therefore, they do not mingle or allow trespassing.

It is interesting that while KSP Nagar weavers themselves are not prosperous, and the reason we started working with them was because they needed support to get out of exclusion, they feel superior to the nomadic tribes, and attempt to keep them at bay and excluded.

I moved to Asoor, another hub of villages in Kanchipuram where we have a network of 10 entrepreneurs managing digital resource centres for the village folks. In almost all villages, the neighbouring hamlets or villages do not get easy access to each other's area. According to our digital entrepreneurs at the village level, several times people will go far away to get digital services rather than using the facility in the neighbourhood if their social strata, caste, tribe, are different.

I have seen serious class and caste based differences affecting access to facilities and opportunities in Bihar, Rajasthan, MP, etc., but experiencing the same in Tamil Nadu was a shock.

Similarly, a few years back, we had introduced digital literacy and a digital resource centre in a fishermen village next to French town of Pondicherry. The people there would not share their temples,

therefore nobody from the neighbouring hamlet would not come to our centre.

The digital centre in Vaidikuppam fishermen village in Pondicherry actually differentiated between each person, from street to street, temple to temple, hamlet to hamlet, even though they all collectively earned their livelihood being fishermen.

It is ironical that many of our centres reflect the existing differences of class, caste, and traditional practices between each other, and based on the same even the digital space get that class tag based on who runs it and who works there. Everyone wants to understand the internet and become digitally literate, and I have written about this in the past -- how these centres help break social and gender based divisions. Yet there are places and corners where our traditional, unscientific, practices become barrier for digital literacy, digital access, digital integration, digital services, and digital rights.





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