Access and Beyond

An Intersectional Approach to Women's Everyday Experiences with ICTs

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Abstract

ICTs are seen as the pathway not just to (economic) development, but key to removing social inequality and corruption, and ensuring good governance. At the heart of this narrative is the assumption that technology is neutral and an a priori source for good. Through in-depth interviews with working class women in Delhi, this study seeks to understand how an intersectional social location affects women's experiences with ICTs, and finds that they are mired in complex ways with structures of caste, gender, class and education. Through this, the study seeks to interrogate the question of justice in a digital age, and builds on feminist insights that technology must be seen as a set of practices, deeply implicated in power relations.

1 INTRODUCTION

In December 2016, the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, underlined the importance of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for the future of India.

Technology is the biggest strength of the dalits, the oppressed, the exploited and those deprived. It is a myth that it is a treasure for the rich and educated. No, it is the treasure for the poor. It is going to empower the poor, the small business traders, the farmers in far and very far off villages, the tribal living in the forest.[1]

Praising the power of the government application for digital transactions, he added that the application is so powerful:

that you will not need either a mobile phone or a smartphone, neither a feature phone nor the internet. Your thumb will be enough. Can you imagine that there was a time when unlettered people were called angutha-chaap?[2] Now your thumb is your identity, your trader, your thumb!

Fond of pithy slogans, in another speech, he sums up the potential of ICTs for India as "IT (Information Technology) + IT (Indian Talent) = IT (India Tomorrow)"[3]. This formula captures many of the particularities of the IT dream in India. ICTs are seen not only as the path to (economic) development, but also as the means to ensure 'good governance' and most importantly, 'respect' on the global stage. Thus, it is IT (Indian Talent) that the world admires, and those who were known as illiterates are now leading the digital revolution. Thus, the three pillars of the 'Digital India' programme are: internet as public utility, digital empowerment of citizens, and services on demand.

This 'magical thinking' in relation to ICTs (Eubanks, 2013) has been called into question by civil rights activists and researchers. While the ICT boom in India made it the poster-child for ICT4D (ICTs for Development) rhetoric (Sarkar, 2016), this has not seemed to benefit everyone. Though the average income has increased, the gap between the rich and the poor has widened (Mapping Digital India Report, 2012). Atrocities against minority groups such as Dalits, Muslims and Adivasis have increased (Teltumbde, 2010). While the World Bank applauds India's AADHAR program as the

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[1]http://www.narendramodi.in/text-of-pms-speech-at-digidhan-mela-in-new-delhi-stalkatora-stadium-30-december-2016-533672 (translated by the author)

[2] A term of abuse for those who are illiterate

[3]http://www.narendramodi.in/indian-talent-and-information-technology-is-india-tomorrow-social-media-resonates-with-shri-modis-words-5188

largest of its kind, and famously, India is said to have more mobile phone users than toilets; civil rights activists claim that digitisation of services is resulting in further exclusion of the most marginalised in Indian society.[4]

Nowhere does the contradictions of the ICT imaginary seem more apparent than in India. India is the largest exporter of ICT services in the developing world, and also the home of the largest offline population in the world.[5] Figures like the second largest market of users abound, and yet, 59.2% of India's population lives on less than 2 dollars a day (ADB 2015, cited in Banaji, 2017: 47). As apparent in the speech by the PM, ICTs are seen as the tools which can bridge the gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged in society (Gurstein, 2003). The rhetoric of the information and knowledge society is increasingly being called into question, and yet, continues to hold power over the imaginations of policy-makers, politicians, tech-gurus, and citizens all over the world (Mansell, 2012). In such a scenario, efforts to bridge the digital divide are seen as a priority by the government, international agencies and NGOs, and corporate institutions alike.

Thus, Onno Ruhl, the World Bank country director in India, said in 2016,

The digital revolution is transforming the world, aiding information flow and creating huge opportunities for growth and poverty reduction. However, to reap the full benefits will require affordable and wider access to the internet and skills that enable all workers to leverage the digital economy.

This study seeks to interrogate the question of justice in a digital age, and builds on feminist insights that technology must be seen as a set of practices, deeply implicated in power relations. Through an in-depth analysis of the experiences of working class women, it makes an argument for an urgent need for a broader conception of digital justice, and explores the ways in which social forces both govern and are changed by new media in society.

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[4] For just one example, look at Scroll.in's coverage of the issues linked with making the biometric identity card (AADHAAR) mandatory for government schooling and other services. https://scroll.in/topic/38792/identity-project

[5] http://www.dw.com/en/world-bank-points-to-indias-digital-divide/a-19246910

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, I will explore the links between ICTs, social inequality and development, and the role group differentials play in this process. I will do so by tracing the contours of the digital divide debate. I will also draw links between feminist and postcolonial analysis of technology, and the way different researchers have conceptualised the relationship between technology, communication and justice.

2.1 Tracing the Digital Divide Debate

With the rise of the metaphor of the 'information' or the 'network society', issues of inclusion and access to the network have come to the forefront (Castells, 1996). The term 'digital divide' first became popular in policy circles during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Popularised through its use in reports by the U.S. Department of Telecommunications and the United Nations Human Development Report, it signified those who did not have access to the internet infrastructure (Newhagen & Bucy, 2005). Thus, there was a concern not only at the digital divide within countries, but those between countries (Couldry, 2007). In her analysis of these policy debates, Mansell (2002) demonstrates how they were overwhelmingly linked to the role of 'human capital formation' and 'achievement of efficiency and productivity gains associated with the use of new media' (p. 4). Thus, ICTs were seen mainly as a means of economic development. This was considered especially important for developing countries, who were thought to be able to 'leapfrog' the teleological stages of development and be able to participate in the global information economy.

2.2 Critique and Multiple-Level Divides

The concept of the digital divide came under attack for being misleading. Critics pointed out that it wasn't a digital divide, but actually, a socioeconomic divide. Mark Warschauer (2004) sums up the critics well - he writes that the concept is misleading because it utilises a binary logic and posits that both the problem and the solution lie in digital infrastructure. At the heart of the problem that Warschauer identifies is the belief that bridging the digital divide will result in the bridging of other inequalities in society. Instead, scholars like Warschauer (2004) and Norris (2001) prefer starting from flipping this equation: they write that, it is offline inequalities which determine access (and not just presence of digital infrastructure), and there is a risk of the digital divide exacerbating other divides in society (Fuchs, 2007).

Increasingly, there was also a focus on second-level divides: the difference in usage once people were online. Issues of race, gender and class still dictated how much, and with what ease people could use

online resources (Dimaggio, Hargittai, Celeste & Shafer, 2004; Helsper & Eynon, 2013; Katz & Rice, 2002). The binary logic of the digital divide concept was critiqued, and scholars argued that a continuum of digital inclusion was a more appropriate concept (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). Others have focused on multifaceted conceptualisations, which includes motivation, access, skills and use (eg. Van Deursen & Van Dijk 2015). Scholars are now exploring the idea of a third-level divide, which refers to the inequalities in the tangible outcomes achieved from Internet use (Van Deursen & Helsper, 2015). Helsper (2012) adapts Bourdieu's (1986) theory to identify four key domains of both offline and online inequality - economic, cultural, social and personal domains.

There is a strong normative basis behind this well-established field of literature. By linking online forms of capital with offline capital, some forms of internet use are considered more beneficial than others, depending on their outcomes in the form of offline capital. Thus, this assumption functions in a distributive paradigm, where digital equality would refer to an equal playing field in the digital domain. While this scholarship provides many insights, the distributive paradigm has been critiqued as being inadequate. As critics like Payal Arora (2012) point out, a myopic focus on 'instrumental' uses of ICTs can obstruct us from seeing things which actually are. In their study of Facebook users in slums, Arora and Rangaswamy (2015) make a persuasive case for the revolutionary potential of using ICTs for 'leisure'.

2.3   Justice and Technology: Breaking out of the Distributive Paradigm

The distributive paradigm has been identified as being influenced by the Rawlsian theory of justice. John Rawls, in his seminal work, *Justice and Fairness* (1970), lays out a framework which underlines the importance of an equal playing field. According to his theory, injustice occurs due to an unequal distribution of handicaps, and justice would require that individuals be provided with the same 'basket of primary goods'.

This approach has been criticised by scholars like Amartya Sen and Iris Marion Young, for different reasons. In his seminal work, Development as Freedom (1999), Sen interrogates the 'informational base' of different theories of justice. He criticises Rawlsian theory of justice for being unable to account for the different capabilities that individuals have to make use of the same basket of 'primary goods'. Sen comes up with a radical reconception of development as the 'freedom to achieve the kind of life one has reason to value' (p. 42). He differentiates between functionings ('various things a person may value doing or being') and capabilities where the latter is defined as 'a kind of freedom: the substantive the freedom to achieve various lifestyles' (p. 43)

According to Young (1990), while the distributive approach can be rightly applied to resources, there is a tendency to also apply it to non-material resources such as recognition, freedom and dignity. Young places oppression at the center of her analysis, and argues for the need for 'recognition' of marginalised groups in policy processes. Thus, she writes:

Justice should refer not only to distribution, but also to the institutional conditions necessary for the development and exercise of individual capacities and collective communication and cooperation. (Young, 1990: 39)

These approaches have been applied to the question of justice in relation to digital technologies. There is now a wide variety of literature, predominantly in the field of ICT4D (ICTs for Development) that applies the Capabilities Approach to the issue of ICTs (Kleine, 2007, 2013; Poveda, 2015; Smith, Spence & Rashid, 2011). Garnham (1999) makes a link between Paddy Scannell's (1989) concept of 'communicative entitlements' (characterised as the right of citizens to be heard in democracy) and capabilities to argue that access to media are 'enablers of a range of functionings' (p. 121). The Capabilities Approach (CA) has been used to make arguments for bridging the digital divide from different vantage points. Thus, Mansell (2002) uses aspects of the framework to argue that we must adopt a rights-based approach to the question of digital access. Couldry (2007) uses the CA to make an argument on the basis of ethics as to why all humans deserve communicative entitlements and thus, access to the internet.

However, ICTs are not just communicative resources, but as Wajcman (2007) writes,

Technologies embody and advance political interests and agendas and they are the product of social structure, culture, values, and politics as much as the result of objective scientific discovery. (p. 582)

Thus, Dorothea Kleine's (2007, 2013) operationalisation of the Capabilities Approach into the Choice Framework (CF) does not see technology as neutral, but an aspect of the structure that both shapes and is shaped by the agency of citizens. In addition to aspects like availability, affordability, and skills, the CF draws attention to social norms on the use of both space and time as other key aspects which constrain or aid access, and that these can be related to gender, age, ethnicity, etc or other axes of exclusion.

Building on the work of Iris Marion Young, Virginia Eubanks (2013) also criticizes the distributive logic of the digital divide rhetoric, and argues that it is oppression, and not equality, that must be at the center of any analysis of technology and justice:

Seeing high tech equity only as broadly shared access to existing technological products ignores other social values, neglects decision-making processes, sees citizens only as consumers, and ignores the operation of institutions and social structures. (p. 26)

Eubanks argues that we need to ground the information revolution by recognising that it does not affect social groups in the same way- for example, the information revolution from the perspectives of women of colour in her hometown of Troy showcases an increasing precarity and marginalisation not in spite of the digital revolution, but because of it. Thus, she argues that social location shapes people's experiences of technology and the digital world, and critiques the celebratory accounts of cyberfeminism.

2.4   Women, Technology and Intersectionality

Cyberfeminism celebrates the revolutionary potential of new technologies for a new gender order. This has included the celebration of the way activities like gender-swapping online encourages people to challenge traditional notions of gender and acquire a 'new sense of gender as a continuum' (Turkle, 1995: 314) as well as the potential of new reproductive technologies to overcome the embodied basis of gender difference (Haraway, 1984). Much feminist research has also focused on the systematic marginalisation of women from jobs and professions that are defined as technological (Cockburn, 1983; Hacker, 1989; Wajcman, 1991). However, intersectional and third world feminist argue that these concerns largely reflect the concerns of middle-class white women in the West (Gajjala, 2004; Eubanks, 2013). For example, a tendency to focus on the number of women in the tech industry often looks at only the white-collar jobs, ignoring the large number of women occupied in blue-collar jobs in relation to technology, in the global North and the global South.

The theory of intersectionality argues that 'social identity categories such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability are interconnected and operate simultaneously to produce experiences of both privilege and marginalization' (Smooth 2013). A key aspect of intersectionality lies in its recognition that multiple oppressions are not suffered separately but rather as a single synthesized experience.

An intersectional approach to ICTs seeks to analyse the way structures of class, caste, gender, religion and sexuality etc intersect and form a mutually influencing relationship with technology. Thus, for example, the edited anthology the 'intersectional internet' applies an intersectional framework to 'trace the types of uneven power relations that exist in technological spaces' (Noble & Tynes 2016: 5). Similarly, Gajjala (2012) applies a postcolonial feminist lens to not only consider the relation of gender to privilege offline and online, but also how this relates to larger structures of political economy and

power relations between the global North and global South. Intersectional lenses have also been applied to the study of media in India.

2.5   Social Class and Media in India

According to Asian Development Bank Key Indicators Asia, an estimated 59.2 percent of the 1.267 billion population of Indians lived on less than 2 dollars per day with 23.6 percent living on 1.25 dollars a day (ADB, 2015: 207; cited in Banaji, 2017: 47). This indicates that approximately 716 million Indians were very poor, out of which 286 million were living on less than 1.25 dollars a day. Thus, a majority of Indians are still very poor. Though the median income has increased, the urban–rural and rich–poor divides have become wider: farm incomes have grown by half the national average (Mapping Digital India Report, 2012: 11).

Shakuntala Banaji (2017) explains the difficulty of categorising class in India. Thus she writes,

Social class in India overlaps with other categories in multiple ways - religion, caste, gender, language, migration and region are all messily implicated in class status. Sub-classes within the middle and working classes (lower middle, middle-middle and upper-middle; blue collar, urban dispossessed; rural smallholder, rural landless, Dalits and Adivasis) are characterised by stringent sets of customs, rituals and markers of caste distinction and/or oppression. (p. 41)

Thus, in the context of India, issues of class, caste, gender, religion and sexuality are interlinked.

For instance, Dalit feminism argues for 'the re-examination of gender relations as fundamental to the broader ideologies of caste; that we must understand the multiple and changing manifestations of caste in Indian society if we are to understand the particular forms in which gender inequality and sexed subordination are produced'. (Rao, 2003: 5)

While India is celebrated as the poster-child for ICT for development, work on new media has explored the way digital technologies interact with the social structures of divided India (Jeffrey & Doron, 2013; Mazzarella, 2010; Sarkar, 2016) However, more studies of media use have focused on the urban middle-class in India (Brosius, 2010; Lukose, 2009; Rai, 2009), though there are some which have focused on the working-class and the marginalised as well (Banaji, 2006; 2017; Arora & Rangaswamy, 2015).

3   CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Drawing the insights from Sen and Young together, allows us to underline the importance of contextuality and the need to listen to the experiences of people. Thus, instead of abstract, self-sustaining theories of justice where technology is always already empowering or disempowering, there is a need for 'normative reflection that is historically and socially contextualised' (Young, 1990: 3). Thus, this study takes as its starting point that social forces and technology influence and shape each other, and that intersectional approach to social location can be used to understand the lived experiences of ICTs in the lives of marginalised women in India.

4   RESEARCH QUESTION

What can we learn about the relationship between social location and technology from an analysis of the ways in which marginalised women articulate their experiences with ICTs?

5   METHODOLOGY AND REFLECTION

5.1   Research Strategy

My initial inspiration for this study was to attempt to map out the complexity of the experience of digital exclusion in India. On deeper reflection, I realised that though I critiqued the distributive paradigm in my conceptual framework, I continued to function within it by making value judgements about who was not connected, and by my desire to map the barriers which hindered this connectivity. Inspired by the work of scholars such as Virginia Eubanks (2013) and Shakuntala Banaji (2017), I realised that it was important to acknowledge my presupposed assumptions (Groenwald, 2004), and instead, be led by what the women I spoke to felt was important in their lives, and the value (or lack of) ICTs in them.

For this, qualitative methods such as interviews and ethnography seemed suitable practically and epistemologically. Ideally, my study would consist of a mixed methodology where I triangulate my research with critical analysis of policy documents and debates; interviews with policy-makers and public officials at various levels of the process; and ethnographic methods to understand how it plays out in the lives of people. However, due to the financial and time constraints and the limited scope of this project, I opted for qualitative interviews. Since my aim was to 'understand the meaning of respondents' experiences and life worlds' (Warren, 2002: 83), focus groups were not considered appropriate, and I decided to use semi-structured in-depth interviews inspired by a phenomenological and postcolonial feminist perspective (Oakley, 1981; Visweswaran, 1994; Shome & Hegde, 2002; Gajjala, 2004, 2012; Donald, 2009).

5.2 Sampling

Ideally, it would be interesting to interview women from a diverse range of backgrounds all over India. However, considering the limited scope of this study and the abundance of studies exploring the study habits of the middle-class in India, and the diversity in India, I decided to focus on the experiences of working-class women, ensuring that it included diversity in terms of religion, age, caste and hometown. Though many axes of marginalisation exist, social class seemed the best starting point for a study such as this. Thus, I used a mixture of theoretical and snowball sampling, where my selection criteria were a rough indication of class status. As Patton (2002) writes, 'studying information-rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalisations' (p. 230). A snowball process was used when for example, as I interviewed someone, I asked them if they knew others in their neighbourhood who would be willing to talk to me. Overall, thirteen interviews were conducted over the months of June and July 2017. A small cash supplement was provided to the interviewees.

5.3 Design of Research Tools

Following ethical approval from my supervisor, a consent form and an information sheet were prepared in Hindi and Urdu. However, on realising that the interviewees were more comfortable with verbal explanations, and wary of signing documents, I chose to give oral explanations and recorded verbal consent before each interview (See Appendix A and B). I made sure that they were aware that they could refuse to answer any questions, or stop the interview at any time, and gave them my contact details if they wanted to change their mind later. Anonymity, and ethical use of the data were also promised. A topic guide was developed (see Appendix A).

5.4 Interview Process, Analysis and Critical Reflexivity

A critical reflexivity about the 'history, heritage and legacies' of traditional research methods, and making explicit the power relations encoded therein is central to a postcolonial methodology (Shome & Hegde, 2002: 259). Thus, my position as a middle-class, upper-caste Muslim woman and a student at a prestigious educational institution in the global North, who chooses to conduct research 'at home', and the politics of representing the experiences of marginalised women, must be acknowledged.

As Radhika Gajjala (2004) writes in the Preface of her book,

Working-class diaspora women and a majority of the women within the real geographic Third World locations pay the price for the discourses produced by bourgeois diasporic postcolonials, who are

viewed by the Western world as ideal informants because of their/our ability to translate ourselves and our Other so that we fit appropriately within hegemonic structures of power and thought. (p. 6)

Kamala Visweswaran (1994) highlights the role of location in affecting the power relations in the interview process. I conducted interviews wherever the participants felt it was most convenient, whether it was at their workplace when there was a lull in the work, or in their homes. Sometimes, this was not possible, as in the case of Rameshwari, a Dalit woman who travelled hours to reach the neighbourhood where she collected garbage from the homes and cleaned out the drains, whose interview was conducted at her choice, on a bench in front of a makeshift laundry shop.

While most interviews were conducted alone, this was not always possible. Locations such as one-room homes, or a terrace which was also used as a playground by the children of the building meant the presence of neighbours or children sometimes. In the instance of Rameshwari, this meant that the shop-owner ironing clothes as we talked, felt free to add pithy comments sometimes. This also meant that the durations of the interviews differed. While the average length was fifty minutes, in a few cases, women had to return to their work and thus the duration was shorter, while the longest interview was ninety minutes. After each interview, I reflected on how these dynamics had shaped the conversation.

I spent considerable time developing rapport with the interviewees, and ensuring that they felt at ease. In this, I was guided by Dwayne Donald's notion of 'ethical relationality':

Ethical relationality is an ecological understanding of human relationality that does not deny difference, but rather seeks to more deeply understand how our different histories and experiences position us in relation to each other. This form of relationality is ethical because it does not overlook or invisibilise the particular historical, cultural, and social contexts from which a particular person understands and experiences living in the world. It puts these engagements at the forefront of engagements across frontiers of difference. (Donald, 2009, 5-6, cited in Banaji, 2017: 151)

A topic guide was developed (see Appendix A), but I was guided more by what the participants themselves wanted to talk about, listening closely, and asking follow-up questions. The interview data was transcribed verbatim, and I chose to conduct the analysis with untranslated text. Since my choice of method of analysis is thematic analysis, this did not produce as much of a challenge. However, in translating the passages I choose to include here, I was aware of the many cadences and nuances lost, and I have tried to include notes where word choices seemed significant. After I fully transcribed the recordings, the data was analysed through thematic analysis, a 'form of pattern recognition within the data, where emerging themes become the categories for analysis' (Fereday &

Muir-Cochrane, 2006: 4). Open and Axial coding procedures were employed, which were then organised into themes (see Appendix D).

I reflected on the various speaking positions and the fractured subjectivities (Loff, 1999; Warren, 2002) that came up during the interview. For instance, my class identity seemed to be encapsulated in the use of a high-end smartphone to record the interviews. It was often used as a reference point such as when Seeta said to me 'No one in my family has a phone like that yet' or when Salma used it as a rallying point to describe the difference between the class of employers who used phones like mine to do online-shopping, and herself, who only credited her phone with balance when it was necessary to make a call.

In retrospect, it seems to me that I was not fully prepared for the central role caste would play in this project - my upper caste privilege resulted in an ignorance of the various different castes and subcastes and the full weight of the subtle connotations of many things said appeared to me only after analysis of the transcripts. Here, my religious identity as a Muslim and my hometown in Bihar also meant that I was more familiar with the caste divisions followed among Muslims, and those among Hindus in Bihar.

At other moments, shared solidarities emerged between the women and I. One such instance was when Shagufta, a few years older than me, realised that we both planned to teach, and offered me advice about resources I could seek out. At other times, the interviewees adopted the role of the older woman who had to guide my choices, especially relating to matrimony. Shabana, a young wife with two small children, asked me half-jokingly and half-challengingly if I was one of those young women who dreamed of a 'love marriage' or if I would marry by my family's choice. When I said I wanted to study first, she agreed and spent much time describing the myriad responsibilities of a wife.

For Sitara, in her late 30s, who has known me some years, this answer was not enough. She advised me seriously about the need to find the right balance between education and career, and fulfilling the expectations of my family and society. I found a strange mirroring when I said that like her eleven-year-old daughter Rumi, who gets annoyed when her extended family bring up the issue of her marriage, I too wanted to follow my dreams first. This mirroring was distorted and made terrible by the fact that I'm more than a decade Rumi's senior.

Thus, the deep disjunctures between our worlds were much larger than the overlaps. In showcasing their voices, I'm aware of the privilege which grants me the power of the pen to write texts inaccessible to many of them.

6 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

6.1 "These phones are not for people like us": Issues of Ownership

Technology was an ubiquitous presence in women's lives. Whether they took the form of medical machinery and the computerised entry system in their workplace; the admission system in the government school; the computer and machines which take your biometric identity; or the TV and multiple gadgetry present in the houses they cleaned. However, this did not mean that they owned phones or computers. Out of the fourteen women, only four owned their own phones, and one had a laptop in the household. Out of these, three were smartphones. A further three had owned personal phones in the past. Everyone's household contained at least one mobile phone, but they usually belonged or at least stayed in the possession of husbands or sons.

Yaseeran, in her forties, lives in a one-bedroom flat. Her household consists of her husband, a daughter and a son, his wife, and a grandson. Shifting to Delhi from rural West Bengal more than a decade ago, she is the primary earner of the family, along with her son who drives an e-rickshaw in the neighbourhood. She works in four homes where her duties consist of buying ingredients, cooking meals, and doing other household tasks. Her description of her household situation was as follows:

IR: Okay, and do you have a phone at home?

Yaseeran: Yes, there is a phone. There is one phone, it stays at home.

IR: Who uses it more?

Yaseeran: Everyone uses it. It contains everyone's number. It's actually my phone. They don't have a phone, they all use my phone.. And I keep it at home.

IR: Okay.. Which phone is it? Is it the small one?

Yaseeran: Yes, it is the small one (ie. non-smartphone).

IR: Who has the phone usually?

Yaseeran: My son takes it outside. Sometimes he takes it, sometimes he leaves it. That's what he does. I tell him to keep the phone at home, if I have some work, I might get a call. Some employer wants to call me, or any other thing.. Then how can I call and tell them without a phone?

This was considered ordinary by most of the women, though Yaseeran expresses some frustration here. However, the difficulty which not having the phone in your possession resulted in sometimes is highlighted in the story of Sitara, who is also from a village in West Bengal, as she told me the story of how she happened to come to Delhi. She describes the moment she realised that her husband had gambled away the last of their money.

Sitara: So what should I do? Kill myself? But my three kids would be in trouble then. If there is no mother, there is nothing in this world.. So after thinking a lot, I decided to call my parents, who had wed me here. I called them and said, look, this is how things are, if you don't do something, I will either kill myself, or take my three children and go away somewhere. They said, don't go anywhere, when it is morning, we will come. On Sunday morning, my mother and father came, and they started saying things.

IR: They stayed in a different village?

Sitara: Yes, in a different village. My in laws stayed in a different one. I had hid (chipke) and called them on the phone. He (her husband) had gone somewhere, I stole (churake) the phone and called them. When my father called on the phone at night, it was Rumi's father's phone (her husband). He said, how did they know this news? So I said, I don't know, why will I know that? I fabricated some things and told him. He said, no, you have told them. I said, yes, I told them, so what? You caused me so much pain, you squandered away all our money, so I told them! (emphasis mine)

This seemed to hold true even more in the case of younger girls. Both Yaseeran and Sitara spoke about their daughters who begged their mothers to buy phones for them. Sandhya, the youngest of the

interviewees at eighteen, humorously described the way she had to cajole and bribe her elder brothers so she could have some time on their phones.

6.1.1 Affordability and Materiality

Many women saw smartphones as a luxury product, one which many did not consider 'appropriate' or useful in their own lives. Seeta, a forty-year-old, who does part-time work, hemming clothes and attaching buttons and hooks, brought up the issue of affordability. Explaining why she prefers a new non-smartphone over a used smartphone, she also brings up the fragility of mobile phones.

> *IR: Okay. And which phone do you have now? The small one?*
>
> *Seeta: Yes, it is the small one (non smart-phone). Dear, till now I have not been able to buy such a phone (pointing at my phone). No one in my family has a phone like that yet. Because, dear, if you have money, only then you will buy these things. For instance, if such a mobile costs 7000 rupees, so if you buy a mobile which costs 7000, what will you eat all month? Everything has to be considered. And the thing is, if I buy a used (smart)phone of 500 rupees, or of a 1000 rupees, so no one sells a phone that is in perfect condition, do they? If there is something wrong with it, that's when they sell it. Then how can I keep getting it fixed all the time? So I take phones that are of my level (aukat). I bought a phone of 1200 rupees now.*

Seeta's use of the word 'aukat' (level/status/position) is very significant, and points to a clear demarcation in her mind between those who can successfully use smartphones, and for herself, for whom it would be overstepping some kind of class boundary. This is articulated by Salma as well.

Salma, who migrated from Bihar some years ago, works as a domestic help in one of the gated communities in Delhi. When I asked if she ever used her phone for anything else besides making calls, she had a scathing reply which makes a clear link between social class positions and benefiting from ICTs:

> *Salma: What else will I use it for? We are poor people.. When there is need to call home (her village), I recharge the phone for 20 rupees. We don't have hundreds of rupees balance all the time, like you. Where I work, there, they sit like fat queens (maharanis) and order this, that, do shopping worth lakhs from their phones.. This is for you all. These phones are not for people like us.*

Many women talked about how easy it was to break and lose phones, and thus, how they were something that constantly need to be replaced or repaired. Moharkali, in her seventies, was overseeing the collection and transportation of garbage by her sons, when I talked to her. Giggling at how she used to play games on her phone sometimes, she explains the story of how her last phone was lost.

> *IR: Do you remember when you got your first mobile?*
>
> *Moharkali: My first mobile? It's been many years.. I have not even taken one since two years. One mobile.. I had been cleaning in the market area. I had a purse, I had some money, one pair of clothing, I had come from home. It had my mobile, my identity card. There was a boy Ismail, he was a little crazy. It was only him I had seen moving forward, and I saw him taking something out.. And just like that, my mobile was gone. And I even ran after him. He took my bag, my packet, and he ran away. I got nothing.. Those who are mad (inaudible) those who drink (inaudible)? He was one of those. Since then, I have not taken a mobile, being irritated. I have lost five phones. I have become completely frustrated (dimaag kharab ho gaya hai), I lost my money and my id papers. Maybe I'll get one in the future.*

Like Moharkali, some women had owned phones in the past, which for one reason or another, could not be replaced or renewed. One reason for women not keeping the household mobile phones with them was that many did not know how to perform basic operational functions on them. The biggest factor in this, according to them, was that of literacy and education.

6.2 "When I haven't studied anything, then from where will I know how to make phones work?": Literacy, Education and Stigma

As per the 2011 census, the overall literacy rate in India is 74.04%. However, this varies dramatically by region and gender. Thus, the literacy rate for women is 65.46% against 82.14% for men.[6] While Delhi has relatively high literacy rates for women (80.76%), many of the interviewees were from neighbouring states such as West Bengal (70.54%), Uttar Pradesh (57.18%) and Bihar (51.50%).

Many women explained that lack of literacy or education was the reason ICTs were not for them. Rameshwari, who was introduced in the methodology section, explained it thus:

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[6] http://www.census2011.co.in/literacy.php

IR: So you do talk on the phone, calling home or .. ?

Rameshwari: Yes, my sons help me talk to my daughters. I don't know all that, how to call someone.

IR: So you're saying you face difficulty in making phones work?

Rameshwari: No, no, I don't know all that. When I haven't studied anything, then from where will I know these things? My children sometimes say to me, Mummy, this is how, but I forget after a while, I don't know these things. Yes, when they put the call on the phone and hand it to me, then I talk to my daughters, then I am able to talk on it.

Lack of education was also identified as a common theme which was preventing people from leading better lives. This was true especially of those who were upper-caste/savarna, who had people in their extended family and social circle who were better off, and for whom upward social mobility seemed to be easier as compared to Dalits (Deshpande, 2011). The link is made especially clear in the case of Shabnam. A young single mother aged twenty-eight, Shabnam works at a hospital as a general duties assistant, which involves moving patients and machinery, performing tasks related to cleanliness, etc. Shabnam spoke about the humiliation she sometimes felt at her being at the bottom of the work chain in her hospital - 'I sometimes look at my relatives and think, why am I the only one behind?'. She tied education and the use of ICTs thus:

IR: Do your parents use a phone at home?

Shabnam: No. My Papa, he's not so educated, so he keeps a small phone, the one with a keypad. My mother has not studied at all, so she does not keep a phone.

IR: Ah, okay. How do you feel when you use your phone?

Shabnam: I don't use my phone much. Because like I have told you, I don't know much English. So sometimes when I use the phone, I am not able to go on. But yes, I manage.

The link between ICTs and educational attainment is well-documented empirically. Thus, education is seen to be positively related to Internet adoption because of 'greater awareness, training, capabilities, and ability to evaluate content' (Pearce & Rice, 2014: 4).

Though the use of ICTs and education is well-linked in the digital divides literature, a few things become significant here. One, Shabnam points to her lack of proficiency in English as a barrier. Even with government and corporate efforts to create content in local languages, both hardware and software use requires some proficiency in a global language (Pearce & Rice, 2014; Wijetunga, 2014; Grazzi & Vergara, 2014). What is more significant is the psychological link between English and upward social mobility in India. This was also articulated by other women. For Pammi, computers and English seemed to be exclusively linked together. Thus, when I asked her if she ever thought she would learn computers, she said matter-of-factly that she would never be able to learn as she did not know English.

Second, what seemed especially significant was that it did not seem to affect men the same way. Thus, while Pammi's husband worked in the same position as here and only had a year or two more schooling than her, he not only used a smartphone, but navigated the internet with confidence. Pammi spoke with pride of how he watched Youtube videos and learnt to fix phones and how he sent money to the village through his phone. It was his old smartphone that Pammi had, but she did not do much except attend calls and was slowly learning to read better by recognising how names and numbers connected to each other.

This was also apparent in the case of Shail and Shabana. Shail who was relatively well-educated and had studied till class 10 had a non-smart phone and had never used the internet. Shail, whose husband is an auto-rickshaw driver, became embarrassed when I asked her about the phone I saw lying on the bed. It was small, and had a crack across the screen. She told me that her husband had two smartphones: one he had bought, and one he had received in a tie-up with a third party company, OLA, which seeks to include auto-rickshaw drivers in an Uber like arrangement.

This requires further research to explore if the stigma of being 'less educated' affects men and women differently. Shail struck me as a very driven woman, running a tailoring business from her home, extremely concerned that her thirteen year old daughter should not do household chores or learn traditionally feminine skills like stitching and embroidery but focus on her education. When I asked if she had ever used the laptop (some employer had given her husband his old and slightly defective laptop), she said 'I'm not interested in these things. (Mujhe ye sab ka shauk nahi hai)'. During analysis, I was struck by the word, which came up often in the transcripts.

6.3 "Giving an unmarried girl a phone is wrong": Upper-caste Femininity and the Governance of 'Shauk'

The word 'shauk' is originally from the Urdu language, but has become part of Hindi as well. In the context of the sentence spoken above, it can be translated as 'interest' but it also used for 'hobby' and less commonly 'desire'. Thus, the adjective 'shaukeen', a derivative of shauk, has upper-class connotations as it refers to someone who has a lot of (usually expensive) tastes or hobbies.

What struck me during analysis was the prevalence of women who said they were not interested in technology. In theory, most felt that the world has overall become a better place through technology, and made life easier. It is completely credible that they did not find a lot of use of ICTs- and not just because they felt they could not fully use it. As Eubanks (2013) points out, this should not be taken as technological pessimism but the beginnings of a critical outlook which makes the connections between technology and inequity (p. 30).

However, at least in the case of upper-caste, single, young women (Sandhya, Shagufta and Seema), other social forces seemed to be at play. In their declarations, they often painted themselves against others, real or imagined.

Thus, when I asked about her sister, Shagufta said 'She has shauk for laptop, for a big mobile phone. Her phone is more expensive than mine.' And when I asked if she likes using her phone, she drew a clear line between 'those who are stuck to their phones 24/7' and herself, who uses phone 'very little', 'by chance'. Similarly, Seema, said, 'I'm not very interested in these things, because I don't get time at all. I work full time, seven days a week, and when I come home, I want to spend time with my son.' but talked about her younger brother 'who has a lot of shauk - for latest mobile phones, bikes, cars etc'.

Interestingly, when I talked further about what they used their phones for, both Shagufta and Seema said they logged into facebook and used whatsapp almost every night. For Shagufta, it was a routine - 'I scroll through Facebook every night, look at what my friends are posting, their status, timelines, share a few photos with messages, then I go to sleep.'

Sandhya, an eighteen-year-old in high school and the only girl in the family, lives with her parents and her two brothers. It was in her case that the links between upper-caste notions of respectability of women, and usage of ICTs became most apparent. During our one hour interview, she repeated the sentiment that she didn't need phones and wasn't interested in them, at least five times, sometimes attributing it to her friends, with whom she agreed. And yet, she expressed her frustration when her elder brother doesn't let her use his phone, and her joy at using her father's:

> *Sandhya: No, why should I argue. What they are saying is correct, that what do I need from a phone? If I need to talk to someone, I pick up my papa's phone, dial the number, and talk. When someone gets a phone in their hand, it becomes a 24/7 obsession with them. *laughs* Then all their attention is there, and they forget everything. Even now, when I take my father's phone, I don't leave it for at least an hour or two. So first I plug in the charger, and then I sit comfortably with it. Because if the battery is low, there is difficulty when Papa takes it to the office. Even now, Papa says, give her the mobile, and she will sit quietly for an hour or two. So whenever I'm free, I clutch the phone, and play my games, that's it.*

Leela Dube (2003) analyses the gendered structures that caste practices rely upon, and highlights that notions of caste morality and caste purity are exercised through the gendered regulation of sexuality. Thus, a concern with the 'purity' of upper-caste women results in restrictions placed on young women's mobility and life choices, guised in the rhetoric of women's safety, ensuring their 'sexual safety as defined by patriarchal families, the community, and the state' (Phadke 2005). Thus, Sandhya explains why her aunt and mother oppose the use of phones by young women:

> *Sandhya: No one thinks phones are a good thing, not my mother, not my aunt. She says, 'what use do girls have of phones?' She says, 'when you're married then you can have your own phone, you can fulfill all your desires (shauk), no one will stop you then. But giving an unmarried girl a phone is wrong'. So I said, 'yes, you are right. Whatever you say, that will be done'. *laughs* Anyways, I say, what use do I have of phones?*

As Sandhya talked about the 'bad atmosphere' (kharab mahaul) of her co-ed government school, she differentiated between girls who 'disappeared with boys' and her own group of friends, who were 'good girls' and agreed that 'they had no use for phones'. Thus, notions of the 'good girl' include not only not using phones, but not even wanting them. That this governing of desire is linked to women's sexuality and purity is apparent when phones are seen to be permissible after marriage by Sandhya's mother (depending on her husband's permission, of course).

For Seema, who occupies the position of a young, upper-caste, working widow, the situation is even more delicate. She explained that she had to start work after the death of her husband, to support her young child. Leaving home for the first time and encountering the working-world, she said, had helped her gain confidence. Speaking about her hopes for the future, she said:

My father keeps telling me to remarry, remarry.. But I don't want to remarry now. I just want to study further, so that I study and stand on my own two feet.. So that.. In the future, my life condition might be good, it might be bad. But I just want to move forward.

Our conversation about Facebook showcases many of the contradictions and pressures of life that she has to face as a young widow.

> *IR: Are you on Facebook?*
>
> *Seema: No, I'm not on Facebook now.. Because my phone was stolen twice, and this one, I've just taken now. I'm not on Facebook now.*
>
> *IR: Okay.. so your old account must be there.. Did you talk to your friends on it or..?*
>
> *Seema: Yes, I only have one or two friends.. I only talk to them..*
>
> *IR: Okay.. And do you use the internet for anything else?*
>
> *Seema: No, I don't use anything else at all.*
>
> *IR: Why do you think that is, I mean..*
>
> *Seema: Meaning.. I just don't get time, actually. And on my Facebook, there are mostly fake people, so I don't like fake people.. My thinking is different.. I think that if there is someone, you should not do fraud with them. Whoever it is, be clear. That's why I only talk to people I know.. I don't talk to unknown people.. Because you get deceived easily. And my face.. I'm not very old.. So everyone quickly assumes things.*

6.3.1 Caste and Technology

Caste also seemed to play a role in other ways. For example, Pammi explained that she had a 'dangerous neighbourhood' because people from the Sapera community (a dalit community) lived nearby. For her, use and misuse of technology was entrenched along caste lines.

> *Pammi: Many things have happened because of phones, there are many kids who have turned bad. Many things have happened, many things are good, many things are bad.. That's the thing. Boys also watch many things in mobiles, film-wilm, they watch everything. Many changes are happening, many changes have happened in kids.*

> *IR: What kind of film?*

> *Pammi: Like when someone loads a film, and they play it. Now the net has come so that also works. It wasn't like this before. Since the mobiles have come, the world has changed a lot.. That's the thing.*

> *IR: These are kids you see around you?*

> *Pammi: Yes, these kids. They put the DJ.. Play songs here and there, here and there.. Putting it by the roadside, lying down and doing something. Actually, near my place, just ahead of it, there is a dangerous area. That's why.*

> *IR: Dangerous how?*

> *Pammi: Like.. there are Sapere. Sapera people eat (inaudible). Many of their kids don't go to school, don't do anything. They just roam around, doing nothing. Those Sapere people live there, that's why.. They live in a different street, but it's the same neighbourhood. So our neighbourhood is dangerous type. Because of the Sapere, that's why.*

As mentioned earlier, this was contrasted by the good use her husband makes of his mobile phone. The moral panic of new technology has a casteist tint in her articulation.

6.4 "I will be trapped. That's why I don't want a mobile.": ICTs and Employers

Some women felt that phones not only did not add any value to their lives, but were in fact an hindrance. When I asked Sitara if she wanted her own phone, she said no. When I asked why, she started laughing. With an arch look, she said

> *Sitara: Look, I work in four homes everyday. Suppose I am working, and my mobile is ringing. So will you work or pick up the phone? So this is why, if you keep mobile, they will say give me your number, she will say give me your number.*

> *IR: Who?*

> *Sitara: Where I work. Everyone will ask for my number. And then if they have any need, it will be 'please come Sitara, please come Sitara' *laughs*. I will be trapped. That's why I don't want a mobile.*

For her, mobiles were considered a tool employers could use to take advantage of you. This was also the case with other women who worked as domestic servants. Salma and Vimla talked about how they would ignore calls from their employers when they skipped a day off work. Vimla explained that once you pick up the call, the employers would say, 'come, we will give you money for medicine', but once you're actually there, they make you do all the work. The dynamic between middle-class women and their domestic help is such that the latter often do not feel able to refuse something directly. When talking to me, Vimla emphatically critiqued the hypocrisy of the women she worked for, who acted as if they were doing a great favour by giving them a salary bonus. She criticised the low pay rates, the rude behaviour she had to face, the burden of doing others' housework and then coming back and doing her own. Seeming to realise who she was speaking to, she said

> *Vimla: You're not going to go and tell them all this?*

> *IR: No, no, absolutely not.. This is just between you and me.*

> *Sitara: She is trusted, she doesn't even know where you work.*

> *Vimla: Arey, you don't know. She is recording it in her mobile.. They know how to send it so all the people in the world can listen to it.. Will they recognise my voice?*

6.5 "I will teach her computers, even if it means not eating vegetables": Computers and the dream of employment

Aside from Shail's home, which had a slightly defective laptop, none of the households contained a computer. Interestingly, mobiles and computers seemed to be regarded as two completely separate categories. Thus, for example, the restriction on phones did not seem to extend to computers. Thus, Sandhya talked about wanting to learn to use the computer from a nearby NGO. She added it to a long list of skills she had to learn before marriage: stitching, cooking, and the beautician and computer course at the NGO.

This interesting juxtaposition of learning to use computers as a skill which not only increases your employment opportunities but your bridal prospects could be seen in the imagination of Seeta. Thus, explaining why she wanted her daughter to study further than class 8th, Seeta says:

Seeta: That's why I have kept her there (school), because there is prestige linked to it. Just think, if I get her married, and she finds good people as her in laws, if they want to make her do something, they can do it. But if her marksheet isn't proper, then who can help that?

For Seeta, her daughter can escape the difficulties of her own life, by getting married into a rich household, where she can help earn, if needed. And 'learning computer' seemed to her the best way to achieve this dream.

> *Seeta: So I think that I will definitely teach her computers. Even if it means not eating vegetables. It is the truth. I will eat chutney-roti, but I will teach her computers. I will teach her computers, then I will prepare for her marriage.*
>
> *IR: So do you really think learning computers is so beneficial, for anyone..?*
>
> *Seeta: Yes, for anyone. Who knows how many people you will find with computers. I have two girls in my extended family. 12,000 rupees is the starting salary for anyone who knows computers. Wherever they are. They can be in a bank, they can be in a shop. Or an office. Everywhere, my dear, everywhere they are using computers for their work. Who knows how many boys, how many girls they require for this. When you have this skill in your hand, then you will find a lot.*

However, it became apparent that she would not be allowing her daughter much say in this decision. When she vehemently expressed that she would not give her daughter a mobile phone even when she grew older, I asked her that wouldn't those same things be available if she learns computers?

Seeta: If I ever see her.. Doing something dishonourable (oonch-neech).. Then I will not educate her, because then, something else has entered her mind. Then I will make her sit at home, and I will get her married. If the child follows the right thing, then what I have thought, the plans I have shared with you..

Thus, her dreams for her daughter functioned within strictly defined caste and gender norms.

Women who had more experience of ICTs, did not seem to think that learning to use computers led to better employment opportunities on its own. Twenty five year old Shagufta, pursuing a masters through distance education, spoke at length about how useful she has found the internet, in opening new avenues for her. Though she doesn't have a computer at home, and has only recently acquired a smartphone, she was able to use the laptop and the internet at her aunt's house.

Shagufta: The main thing is that you're not allowed to go outside the home.. So there are some places you can't go, and some things you can't afford.. That yes, I want to take these classes. Or that I want to go to the hall to watch this film. You're getting what I'm saying? So what I do is, I watch that thing on Youtube. So that you watch it at home. And the basic things in the courses, you can learn them on the Internet.. I was doing teacher training. So for most projects like learning rhymes and the dance steps, I have learnt that on Youtube. Doing painting. Because look, they will be able to teach you what is there in the books. If you want to understand it in detail, you can ask someone who knows about it. But if you don't have such a person, where will you go? You have to learn anyway. So I go on the internet, whether it is Youtube.. Everything in life, even the smallest things, I watch it all on Youtube, and I learn it.

Being the eldest in the house, with a mother who doesn't work and a father who doesn't provide support, Shagufta was keen on getting a good job for herself. I asked her if she thought computer classes would aid her in this, but she felt that since she already knew the basics, learning more would not be a big help. She said she wanted to be a teacher.

IR: What is it that attracts you about teaching?

> *Shagufta: Actually, it is not about attraction. Just think of it like this.. That if you're not getting permission anywhere else, so I only have two or three options left in front of me. Either I take up teaching or.. But teaching is good, you know.*

Similarly, Seema also felt that it would be much better for her to do vocational course instead of learning to use computers, if she wanted to find a better job for herself, and create a better future for her son.

7   CONCLUSION

Through semi-structured interviews, this study has attempted to explore the role of ICTs in the lives of working-class women in Delhi. A few important themes have emerged. While this study focused on computers, mobile phones and the internet, there is a need for a broader conception of technology and a need to look beyond access. A focus which only thinks of justice and technology in terms of distribution is unable to recognise when technology becomes part of the oppressive mechanism which employers use to exert control on women, or when it becomes part of the government system which refuses to recognise you and shows you your helplessness.

Working class women in India exhibit a range of opinions about and experiences with ICTs. What has emerged is that social location deeply affects women's experiences with technology. ICTs are mired in complex ways in the production of caste, gender, class and religious identities through cultural norms.

The policy implications of this are manifold. The assumption that technology is neutral and an a priori source for democratisation and participation for everyone, must be rethought. Justice is not only a matter of having access to the digital infrastructure or the internet, but experiences with ICTs are profoundly shaped by existing inequalities in society. Dorothea Kleine (2013) finds that though installed with the best intentions of transparency and efficiency, the e-procurement system in Chile resulted in the marginalisation of small traders. As Robin Mansell (2012) writes,

Adaptive action is needed to encourage correction such that investment in hardware and software is not treated as a proxy for the capacities of people to make sense of their mediated worlds.. Public and private investment in ICTs would be scrutinized in the light of competing claims over scarce resources. (p. 186).

Arguments about development and social inclusion of marginalised communities through ICTs must confront these issues.

In this study, I have attempted to be explicit about my location, and how it has shaped this project. While caste is seen as a uniquely Indian phenomenon, the issues highlighted in this study should not be taken as specifically Indian problems, those related to the 'developing' world, or as analysis of the essentialist category of the 'third world woman' (Mohanty, 1991). Instead, I have attempted to reflect on the intersectionality of women's experiences, and reflect on how this disrupts the dominant imaginary in relation to ICTs and marginalised communities.

A larger project which employs a mixed methodology of critical analysis of documents, ethnography and participant observation with all genders, can overcome some of the limitations of this study. Research must explore further the links between caste practices and technology in contemporary India. There is also a need to connect this to the political economy of ICTs. Finally, as Snyder and Prinsloo (2007) write,

Social context, far more than hardware, shapes the use of new technologies; new technologies do not hold the key to human progress; new technologies are neither causes nor cures as the context in which they are used or not used is all-important. (p. 175)

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