



SCHOOLING DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND SYSTEMIC ISSUES IN ONLINE EDUCATION

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Abstract

The world has experienced many dangerous diseases like Ebola, Swine Flu, and Plague which have a devastating impact on all the aspect of human life, including social, political, economic, cultural, and education. Likewise, COVID-19 has also so much disastrous impact on human life including all sectors of our society around the world. During this pandemic, almost all the countries of the world have been put into lockdown and all activities and services including the teaching-learning process have been affected adversely. Almost all the educational institution around the world is closed due to the spread of COVID-19 pandemic. In such situation to continue the teaching-learning process the focus is drawn to online learning platforms from the traditional mode of the face-to-face classroom. This pandemic has brought both positive and negative impacts in the education sector. On one hand, the whole world is experiencing and experimenting with the teaching-learning process in online platforms looking at it as a new world of educational opportunities. But on the other hand, in a country like India, there is lack of sufficient resources, lack of adequate knowledge to use information and communication technology tools which becoming a hindrance to conduct and operate online teaching-learning. The large poor population, electricity problem, network issue, lack of personal computer, and other digital devices have created a new kind of inequality in online education platform. Some students have accessibility to the online learning platform and some are not and the main sufferers are students with disabilities leading to a new kind of digital dividend in education. This paper focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on school education in India, where the impact of COVID-19 has been highlighted with the major issues and transition from the traditional system of education i.e. face to face classroom teaching-learning to focusing on online learning. This paper looks into the major challenges that exist in India in conducting online teaching and learning. It seeks to create a forum that can be referred to all the stakeholders of education sectors i.e. the policymaker, administrator, teachers, students as well as the government.

Key Words: COVID-19, School education in India, Online Teaching and Learning, Challenges in Online Education



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Introduction

The Pandemic resulted into the closure of educational institutions in 186 countries around the world to fight against COVID-19 disease. UNESCO estimates that currently over 90% i.e. around more than 1.57 billion learners are out of schools, out of total population of students enrolled in school globally. Schools, colleges, and universities are closed and there is no

certainty when they will reopen. As the days pass by with no immediate solution to stop the outbreak of Covid-19, school and university closures have impacted the continuity of teaching and learning for more than 285 million young learners in India which will lead to negative economic and societal consequences. This period is a very crucial time for the education system in India because various examinations such as Board examinations, semester examinations, entrance tests for various universities are conducted and students are promoted to higher class as well as admission is given to pass out students.

School Education in India during Covid-19 Pandemic

India has 15.50 lakh educational institutions at the elementary, secondary, and higher secondary level. Out of which 2.46 lakh schools are in the urban area and 13.04 schools are in the rural area with 24.79 crore students. But in this pandemic time, all these educational institutions have been closed and people are directed to stay at home, keep social distancing, and wear masks as the Covid-19 virus is transmitted through direct contact with respiratory droplets of an infected person (generated through coughing and sneezing) and also from touching surfaces contaminated with the virus and touching their face (e.g., eyes, nose, mouth). In this critical situation to prevent the potential spread of COVID-19, the Govt of India announced a complete lockdown on 25th March 2020 and as a result, all the activities including the teaching-learning process had stopped all of a sudden. To deal with this pandemic and to continue educational services Ministry of Human Resource Development (HRD), and various regulatory agencies like CBSE, NCERT, Department of Technical Education, etc. have come out with the only viable alternatives way of teaching-learning process through the different television program, home-based learning and online classes to ensure the continuity in education. NCERT has undertaken various initiatives such as Epathsala, National Repository of Open Educational Resources, DIKSHA, National Initiative for School Heads' and Teachers' Holistic Advancement which are becoming helpful for continuity of learning and teaching in this Pandemic period. NCERT, CBSE, and other state boards have reduced and some planning to reduce their school syllabus. However, in such situation, the teaching-learning process is moving from traditional face to face to online education as an alternative but with some serious issues inaccessibility of education.

Educational Institution

All the educational institutions immediately were shut down when the first 21day lockdown was announced by the prime minister of India on 25th March 2020. In the second phase, lockdown started from 15th April, here only 'A' class officers are allowed for their work in various educational institutions. Many of the schools across the country converted into quarantine centers and covid-19 care hospital and there is no certainty when the schools and colleges will reopen. In such situation, the teaching-learning process has been stopped in traditional classroom mode (i.e. face to face mode of education). However online classes have been started but the online classes deprived many underprivileged learners because they don't have a laptop, smartphone, internet connectivity. The schools also do not have adequate infrastructure and information and communication facilities to run online classes. But somehow private educational institutions are able to manage to conduct the online classes in comparison to the Government school mostly in rural India.

Teaching-learning process

Due to school closure students are far away from their learning and other academic activities. MHRD, NCERT, the States' education ministry, and other regulatory bodies of school education have issued the guideline to take online teaching and provided e-learning and training platforms for teachers and students. But there was no readiness in technology, digital content delivery, home-based learning support, and monitoring as well as for assessment and evaluation which resulting in disruptions exacerbates already existing disparities within the education system. As India is a developing country with the world's second-largest population where more than 86% of students belong to rural areas and many of them from poor families with no internet connectivity and digital gadget does not have complete access to education in the online platform. In current education response to Covid-19 is centered on the strategies to maintain learning through distance and online mode of education facilitated by information and communication technology but many crisis-affected, displaced, and disadvantaged learners are not getting the equitable continuation of the learning platform. In such situation the adoption of online and distance learning in education, notably the divides in connectivity and digital literacy, or the language of instruction. It also brings significant deficiencies in the form of lack of human connect, absence of opportunities for collaborative learning and teacher supervision, and the most important deficiency is lack of opportunities for hands-on learning in complex subjects like Mathematics and Science.

Student

Schooling provides essential learning and when schools are closed, children and youth are deprived of opportunities for growth and development. The disadvantages are disproportionate for underprivileged learners who tend to have fewer educational opportunities beyond school. In rural India students who have no accessibility to the internet, personal computer, or smartphone for attending the online classes are affected adversely by the covid-19 pandemic. Poor meritorious students are suffering badly through technical discrimination because they do not have the technical tools and expertise of the internet and usages of digital devices. It is creating a new kind of inequality in school education while accessing educational opportunities. Students with disabilities are also badly affected by this pandemic as they don't have sufficient resources and facilities as required and at the same time, inadequately trained teachers are also not able to cope up with this changing pandemic time to help them. They are not well prepared to teach in online mode and failing to ensure student engagement in the virtual classroom. The survey report of Swabhiman, a community-based organization and Disability Unit of Easter India of the National Centre for Promotion of Empowerment for Disable People shows that children with disabilities are facing a huge risk of dropping out of school as they are not able to cope with online/digital education. The survey was conducted in 11 states of India and found that 43 percent of the (out of one crore) will be dropping out of school. The report also found that 86% of students with disabilities did not know how to use technology and 67% of students expressed the need for laptops, smartphones, or tablets for educational purposes, while 77% asked for study materials in the formats suitable for students with disabilities. Around 61% of them expressed a need for scribes, readers, and attendants, and 74% of students need data/wifi support. In the current situation, domestic violence is also increasing due to the high-stress home environment and forced confinement. Girls and poor children are more vulnerable to domestic violence as they may become a victim of domestic violence or may observe and experience. Such increased domestic violence households possess a particular risk to women and children which will create a barrier to the home learning environment.

The pandemic also negatively impacted the health of school children as millions of poor learners missing out their school meals. These children are at risk of hunger and will lose the key micronutrients and key vitamins that they receive in the school's meals leading to negative impact on physical, brain development, and learning. In case of technical devices

and digital screens, it continuously radiates some RF rays which are quite harmful to student's health and may cause some major physical health issues like, headaches, brain tumors, and sleep disorders, hearing impairment, skin allergies, and eye problem. Increased involvement with online content in some contexts may make children more susceptible to online violence, abuse and harassment, cyberbullying, screen addiction, and digital dependency. There are chances that students' privacy and data security may be violated leading to misuse of these data. As students are spending more time on mobile, laptop, or computer that can cause social isolation due to the lack of human interaction. Social isolation due to school closure, fear of getting affected by COVID-19, inability to get treatment, death of loved ones as well as the wider restriction on movement causing increased levels of worry, stress, anxiety, and diagnosable mental illnesses among the students.

Teacher

All the educational institutions have been closed unexpectedly and for unknown durations and in such situation, teachers are unsure about their responsibilities and struggling in maintaining connections with students to support their learning. Some teachers may feel confused and stressed in this new transitional time of teaching while dealing with online classes. In India, many teachers are not trained and not sound in ICT skills and knowledge to take online classes. It is very new to them and therefore, they are facing a lot of technical problems while taking classes in online mode. They are unprepared to take online classes and they cannot ensure student engagement in the virtual classroom. Although it is not the right time to give them training, however, it is the time to take the maximum output from teachers. To deal with such unpredicted situation the teachers must be trained.

Assessment and Evaluation

This time period is very crucial for the Indian education system because at this time, assessment, entrance examinations are conducted. In many states, students have been promoted to higher classes without examination. Examinations have been postponed and strategies to postpone, skip, or administer examinations after a long time raise major concerns about fairness, especially when assessment to learning becomes only a variable. Postponing examination will disrupt the next academic year of education leading to poor quality of education as there will be limited time to complete the course content and other academic activities. In online education, a continuous and comprehensive evaluation is not possible completely to assess all aspects of the learner because there is no face-to-face interaction

between teacher and students. The teachers are not able to observe the students and modify their learning activities in a constructive way that they can in classroom settings and experience centre practical learning is not possible in online classes.

Issues and Challenges in Online Education in India

In the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, although the entire education system is shifting toward online and distance mode of education many issues and challenges are rooted in our education system, becoming a hurdle in smooth conduction of teaching-learning and evaluation process in the online platform. A new kind of inequality has emerged in access to education because of online education as every student does not have access to electricity, the internet, and other digital devices like computers, laptops, and smartphones, etc. The only students who have access to education have these facilities and the rest are deprived of education. The major sufferers are the poor, disabled, and students with no network and electric connectivity. Following are the major challenges in online education;

Scarcity in Electricity Supply

For powering the devices and connecting to the internet the topmost necessity is electricity in digital education. All-time electricity is essential for remote learning otherwise because of frequent power cuts the computer, laptops, or smartphone won't work in the scheduled time, as a result, there will be a disconnection, no clarity in audio, and buffering in the video while conducting online classes. According to Mission Antodaya, Government of India data 99% of Indian households have electricity, but the total picture luminous if we look at the number of hours for which it is available and the quality of electricity. Mission Antodaya report 2018, shows that only 16% of India's households received less than one to eight hours of electricity daily and only 47% receive more than 12 hours a day.

Expensive Online Education

To ensure continuation in education, online learning is provided to the student as an alternative for traditional classroom learning during this Covid-19 pandemic situation. Online education requires digital gadgets like smartphones, computers, and other technical devices or gadgets but it is not easily accessible for all because of parents' poverty and unemployment. And every parent is also not able to pay the price for data packs through which online learning can be possible. Due to the lockdown economic sector is disrupted; people were lost their job and struggling for basic needs to lead their life. So, it is difficult for them to afford online learning.

Incompetency with Technology/Lack of Technical Knowledge

Online or virtual education needs the requisite skill in technology to make the teaching-learning process a successful one. Online teaching and learning are carried out through the mediums like mail, online chat, video conferencing and social media, etc. by which teachers and students interact with each other. But in India, most of the teachers and students do not sufficient technical knowledge to operate online classes. Lack of technical skill is a barrier to access online or home-based learning as not everyone is skilled or familiar with the use of technology.

Learning in Passive Mode

Students are passively involved in online learning as the teaching is presented in two ways either in recorded classes or live classes. In such situation, they may lose their interest in online learning because the teachers are not present physically to guide them and to draw their attention toward learning activities. All the subject matter included in the curriculum is not suited for online learning and hence, it could not match the level of regular classroom teaching, students also need the teacher in a physical form for their active participation in the teaching-learning process. Many students do not take the online class seriously and don't attend the class due to lack of interest and strict control mechanism.

Digital Divide

In India, there is digital divide across the region or place of residence, class, and gender. According to Few Study -2018, conducted globally only 24% of Indian owns a smartphone, only 11% households possess any type of computer such as desktop computers, laptops, notebooks, palmtops or tablets. National Sample Survey report on household social consumption on education, 2017-18 reported that only 23.8% of Indian households have an internet facility and in rural India, only 15% of households have internet access whereas, for urban households, the proportion is 42%. In fact, only 8% of all households with members aged between 5-24 have a computer with an internet connection.

Percentage of persons of age 5 years and above with ability to operate computer and use internet			
All-India			
Persons of age 5 years and above	Percentage		
	Male	Female	Person
	Rural		
able to operate a computer	12.6	7.0	9.9
able to use internet	17.1	8.5	13.0
	Urban		
able to operate a computer	37.5	26.9	32.4
able to use internet	43.5	30.1	37.1
	Rural + Urban		
able to operate a computer	20.0	12.8	16.5
able to use internet	25.0	14.9	20.1

Note: Computer means desktop computer, laptop computer, notebook, palmtop and tablet (Smartphone was not considered as computer)

Source: National Sample Survey, 2017-18

Percentage of households with computer and internet facility			
all-India			
Indicator	percentage		
	Rural	Urban	Rural +Urban
households having computer	4.4	23.4	10.7
households having internet facility	14.9	42.0	23.8

Source: National Sample Survey, 2017-18

Internet and Mobile Association of India in its Digital in India reports, 2019 highlighted proportion of internet access and penetration in India. It has reported that the people having internet connectivity out of which 67% of men and 33% of women are having internet access and in rural areas, 72% of men and 28% of women have internet access. Only 2.7% have access to a computer and 8.9% to internet facilities among the poorest 20% of households. In the case of the top 20% of households, the proportions are 27.6% and 50.5%. The difference is also blunter in case of internet access among different states. In the states like Delhi, Punjab, Kerala, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand, more than 40% of households have internet access. The proportion is less than 20% for Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Bihar, Assam, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, and West Bengal. It prominently shows that there is a disparity in terms of gender, class, and region in internet access and connectivity. So, there is also a big challenge of online learning and the equal educational opportunity of male and female, rural and urban students through online mode.

Poor Speed and Connectivity

Successful and haslefree online teaching-learning depend on strong internet connectivity and proper signal but in case of India low internet connectivity and poor speed are yet another barrier in online education. In India, geographically remote, hilly, and rural areas always face problem of internet speed and connectivity issues. During online learning when the signal is lost the class will be also missed out and students will fail to understand the concept properly. Poor internet connectivity or network issues restrict equal access to online learning at home and do not ensure equal access to educational resources. Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) in its report “COVID-19: A wake up call for telecom service providers”, says internet and technical infrastructure in India is not ready for the paradigm shift to online learning as it cannot ensure the sound delivery of online classes to students across the country. It pointed out signals and connectivity issues as the major problem while attending online classes. It reveals that both private and state players have not yet been technically equipped in providing assured connectivity to all subscribers. It shows that among respondents who use home broadband, over 3% face cable cuts, 53% face poor connectivity, 11.47% face power issues, and 32% face signal issues. In the case of mobile data, 40.2% face poor connectivity, 3.19 face power issues, and 56.6% face signal issues.

Conclusion

The pandemic COVID-19 has brought a disastrous impact on the economy, demography, international relation, culture, and trade as well as education. Students and teachers far away from the traditional way of learning due to schools’ closure across the country. However, at the same time, it has also brought an opportunity to experiment and explore online education as a result the whole education system will be ready for the future. In India, the online education platforms create a kind of inequality in accessing educational opportunities because of disparity in accessing the digital gadget and internet in remote, rural and urban areas as well as due to poor economic conditions of people in India. Therefore, various problems of our education system should be solved, the disparity must be minimized and different measures and initiatives must be taken for shifting normal classroom learning to online learning which will help in combating such unprecedented situation in the future.

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