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COVID-19 AND ITS IMPACTS ON EDUCATIONAL SPHERE: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Abstract

COVID-19 as a cataclysmic event has deeply scarred the social lives of people across the countries around the globe. Not only the economic sphere but also the socio-political sphere has undergone significant changes because of it. In this backdrop, the objective of the paper is to highlight major interlinkages between COVID-19 and changes in educational practices in India in particular. In this process, the paper looks into key issues arising due to the lockdown of the educational institutions to contain the coronavirus i.e. to diminish the spread of the virus. The major questions being addressed by the paper include those related to how students and teachers along with the administrative structure have been negotiating with the closure of the schools and educational institutions everywhere and how they have responded to the emergency remote teaching method. Related with it is the issue of looking into the possible way out of the same in terms on Online education i.e. imparting education through Online mode in place of normal face-to-face teaching. The paper also touches upon the issue of the digital divide and its ripple effect upon the underdeveloped and marginal section of the students and teachers alike marked by difficulties in their access to the digital educational system.

Keywords: COVID-19, Digital Education, Online Teaching and Learning, India

Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 as a pandemic and subsequent global lockdown has been one of the key events of our time which has affected society in the general and educational sphere in particular. Schools and colleges around the world have been closed since then and still are in the process of limping back to normal. United Nations in its report highlighted that the 'closure of schools and other learning spaces have impacted 94 percent of the world's student population, up to 99 percent in lower-middle-income countries' (United Nations 2020: 02). As a result of which various governments have introduced

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the online education model for their students in which students of schools, colleges, and universities are being given online classes through Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, and similar platform/s through the internet. Similar terms associated with online classroom teachings are 'online learning', 'digital learning', 'e-learning', 'web-based learning', 'remote learning', 'distance learning' and 'virtual learning' among others. The introduction of this new mode of online and digital education raises the important issue of the Digital Divide especially for the developing and under-developed countries. For instance, in India, only 15 percent of school teachers were trained to use and teach by using computers (Ministry of Education 2020). Moreover, in a recent survey of the University of Hyderabad, during the COVID-19 crises shows that only 50 percent of the students have access to laptops and 45 percent can have at best access to internet infrequently facility and 18 percent of the student does not have access to the internet at all (UoH Herald 2020). It is pertinent to note that in developed countries where the majority of the population have access to infrastructure facility (in terms of Information and Communication Technology byproducts) were not much affected by the closure of schools, colleges and universities; whereas the population of the third world countries and developing countries have been facing immense difficulty in achieving inclusive education for their population during the pandemic. Viner et al have highlighted that 'school closures have been widespread in some countries during influenza pandemics, and many studies report important effects on reducing transmission and the size of the pandemic'(2020: 402). This is due to the inaccessibility of either internet services or the unavailability of technological assets at home. In this regard, Digital Divide has emerged as an important issue of concern which is one of the main challenges in providing inclusive education to all during COVID-19. Taking such a scenario as a background, the present paper is an attempt to discuss the opportunities and challenges of the online mode of the education system. It underlines the pedagogical challenges along with infrastructure (ICT) issues being experienced by both teachers and students in particular during online teaching mode.

Education Crises in Covid-19 Pandemic: Global Concerns

COVID-19 and the subsequent global lockdown have hit every sector adversely; the worst affected area by this has been the educational sphere. It has been aptly noted that changes in lesson design and learning outcomes in the times of Covid-19 pandemic are here to stay for a long time (Lockee 2021: 5-6). Furthermore, it has made more visible the socio-economic barriers among the relatively disadvantaged section of the society that have restrained them to have access to educational facilities. Thus, they are unable to engage their child/ children in educational development. It has been rightly noted that 'the Covid-19 pandemic did not destroy schools, but it has weakened many education systems, testing their responsiveness to emergencies, including their ability to adapt without causing new forms of exclusion' (Martínez 2020). Furthermore,

'the sudden closure of schools because of the COVID-19 pandemic left teachers and parents with little time to prepare for home schooling' (Asian Development Bank 2021: 4). Most importantly, 'The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the lives of students in different ways, depending not only on their level and course of study but also on the point they have reached in their programmes' (Daniel 2020: 92). If one takes into account the equally important stakeholder in the online educational practice i.e. those students who have been participating in such remote learning process, it has been observed that the satisfaction and performance of students during the pandemic period of COVID 19 online classes have to be taken into account so as to make the system work (Gopal et al. 2021) The situation has also altered the way teachers have been engaged in the traditional form of teaching and are now moving towards a more online / hybrid mode of teaching having new sets of challenges and opportunities and capability sets (Carrillo & Flores 2020: 466-487). On the other hand, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the education sector has subsequently innovated various new approaches leading to digital learning throughout the world. The shift towards Online learning across the countries around the globe due to Covid 19 pandemic has been seen as 'Crisis-response migration' by Adedoyin and Soykan (2020: 1-13). Needless to say, "Online learning has emerged as a panacea in the time of COVID-19 crisis" (Dhawan 2020: 5-22). Along with it, distance learning merged with the digital education has also become very much visible thus heralding something which can be understood as 'global' education. Even though at many places the lockdown has been partially lifted and eased upon, the education sector is still struggling to open and function properly. Furthermore, though in many countries (especially the developed countries) the schools, colleges, and universities have partially opened for offline classes, but in developing and underdeveloped countries a large number of the student population is still studying through online mode of learning.

The new education system i.e., online teaching and learning has both its pros and cons. On the one hand, it has eliminated the burden of carrying heavy bags to school as pointed out by Pathak that "It has another positive aspect of the situation that the assumption is that the lockdown period should not be wasted; students and teachers must keep their 'normal' activities alive, complete the 'syllabus' through 'online' learning, and get their degrees in due time" (Pathak 2020). On the other hand, most of the teachers and students are facing problems due to the unawareness and lack of resources of educational tools and devices of new communication technologies. According to United Nations' *Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and beyond* (2020: 02), the pandemic has disturbed 1.6 million learners in more than 190 countries and 94 percent of the worlds' student population has been impacted closely in their learning spaces. It can be pointed out that before the crisis, different strategies were being formulated to reduce child's vulnerability in education. Due to the pandemics, the situation is getting worse. The Report has further mentioned that 23.8 million children from pre-primary to tertiary standard have dropped

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out from schools and are not able to get enrolled for the next year.

Similarly, *Education in the time of COVID-19* (ECLAC and UNESCO 2020) has noted that 'Household access to digital devices is also very unequal in the countries of the region. Beyond access to mobile phones, laptop computers are the most common device in households; on average, around 57% of students in the seven countries analyzed have laptops at home' (2020: 05). Significantly, the Report had also underlined the disparity in having electronic devices to attain online classes. According to the World Bank Opinion 2021, educational disparities and learning losses have increased and 'at the peak of the pandemic, 45 countries in Europe and central Asia region closed their schools, affecting 185 million students' (Donnelly et al. 2021). As far as the issue of teachers' preparedness to support digital learning is concerned, Schleicher in an OECD paper has noted that 'Teachers have reported high need for training in the use of information and communication technologies (ICT)' (2020: 16). Thus, it can be fairly observed that the global crisis as an offshoot of COVID-19 has pushed schools' closure for the long run. It has deeply affected the method of the teaching-learning process, as it has considerably moved from physical classes to online classes. Due to this new teaching and learning system, both teachers and students have been also exposed to psychological stress. While settling for an online mode of teaching multiple barriers arise such as lack of access to digital resources to both teachers and students, availability of trained teachers, and frequent internet facilities created stress upon both students and teachers. These stressors have worsened with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic when social distancing and safer at home measures resulted in mandated remote work for faculty, staff, and administrators (Johnson et al. 2021: 01; also see Feghali and Offiler, 2021: 212-241; Grover 2021: 75-91).

Pedagogical & Learning Concerns in Indian Context

In India, the closure of schools started due to pandemic between March 2020 and July 2021, due to the necessity to impose lockdown the youngest marginalized children have struggled in many ways; for instance, lack of devices, electricity, loss of earnings during the pandemic among others. Muthuprasad et al. have underlined that 'Technical proficiency of teachers and learners related to usage of computer and internet is a major factor determining the effectiveness of online classes' (2021: 7). Similarly, Covid 19 also has resulted issues related to attendance and teacher-student interaction or for that matter, the online lectures being less interactive as it is in the face-to-face physical setup students and teachers are able to interact more regularly which adds up to their understanding of the study materials (Chakraborty et al. 2021: 360; also see Cheong et al. 2021; Joshi 2020: 205-226). This psychological shift has raised two main concerns; one is how perfectly teachers and students are efficient to teach and learn through online teaching aid; and another is the increased teacher-pupil ratio (Ministry of Human Resource and Development,

GoI 2017). The pandemic-induced new education system has only worsened this ratio. In India, according to the Unified District Information System for Education Plus 2019-20 (UDISE+ 2020) Report only one in four teachers was trained to use a computer for teaching. Even the share of the trained teacher is less in the government schools. The report presents the disparity among the states with the training of teachers. Gujarat trained 57% of its teachers while Madhya Pradesh has trained just 9% of its teachers (Ministry of Education 2020: 30-33).

Another issue of concern has been the relatively un-attentiveness of the students during the online classes. Neuwirth et al. have highlighted that the students were not behaving in the manner like they were expected in the face-to-face classroom mode of learning (2020: 07). They further noted that students are not paying attention to their classes in online mode like they were during the face-to-face online classes. They were also not responding to any questions. Such behavior does not help students in the long run. Furthermore, it has been pointed out that 'Online face-to-face classes (video) are encouraged by most; however, some students (economically disadvantaged) have expressed that the face-to-face online class consumes more data packages' (Pokhrel and Chettri 2021: 137). According to New National Education Policy, 'teacher education is vital in creating a pool of school-teachers that will shape the next generation. Teacher preparation is an activity that requires multidisciplinary perspectives and knowledge, formation of dispositions and values, and development of practice under the best mentors (Ministry of Education, GoI 2020: 42). The schools, colleges, and universities also struggled with the problem of conducting examinations and promoting students. The University of Delhi adopted a one-time measure to promote students by grading students based on Internal Assessment and marks awarded in the previous year/ semester/ term by attaching 50% weightage to each (Ashri and Sahoo 2021: 78). Furthermore, the students who were in the final semester /term/ year for the undergraduate and postgraduate have to appear in Open Book Examination (OBE). They have also highlighted that the 'glitches have led to the late submission of answer sheets. Apart from the technical drawbacks of the portal in terms of its working, technical issues could be observed in the result declaration. Such cumber-some and mismanaged OBE has led to a delay in the result deceleration, which negatively affected the students. The misery of the students did not end here; some students were marked absent or zero' (ibid: 79).

The impacts of COVID-19 in different ways on the educational front are too visible to be ignored rather these require serious attention. For instance, Garg has pointed out that 'the online mode cannot be a substitute for the regular mode of education in the foreseeable future, due to the effectiveness of integrated, learner-focused pedagogies and assessment tools of learning and the focus deviation through the online mode due to multiple online resources

(2020: 284). For Tesar, 'there was a minimal meaningful investment in online teaching and learning; there were no necessary adjustments of assessments or to the volume of work required of them (and students); or of the way the content was delivered without any further pedagogical considerations' (2020: 557). Thus, 'Online classes cannot deliver all functions like that of the classroom like the physical setting of friendship and socializing, free meals, health care, outdoor sports activity which help in the over-all development of the students' (Zhao 2020: 192; also see Blackman, 2020). Singh et al. have underlined that 'Internet connectivity issues, attendance of students, punctuality of students and lack of proper devices for some students' were primary issues. Disruptions in connectivity, digital and intellectual, pose a challenge in "ensuring that all students are on the same page and are following instructions' (2020: 18). It is difficult to concentrate on a mobile phone during a lecture all the time due to the inappropriate or small screen like mobile and note pad that doesn't help them to focus throughout the lecture. As well, constantly watching at mobile screen also has a bad effect on the eyes and concentration which is a serious threat to the brain development of children.

Digital Divide and Online Teaching-Learning Mode

The digital divide can be understood as the inaccessibility or unawareness concerning the use of new communication technology due to socio-economic differences among individuals and households. Pandemic has compelled students and teachers to move towards the use of online teaching and learning tools on an urgent basis. It has once again raised the issue of 'Digital Divide' in the world. The lack of awareness of using devices and lack of electricity as well as access to frequent/ continuous internet connection has come to the forefront as a loophole to practice a new form of the education method. Though this is rarely a problem in developed countries for the country like India, people still struggle with such problems. Rural India where the electricity problem persists and the internet connection is poor; student and teacher struggles to connect with the online education system. It has been found that students are not able to concentrate on online learning due to the poor internet connection for hours that create unnecessary stress among them. For example, Bhattacharya has highlighted that the 'access to the student does not merely mean the internet access, but the access to adequate gadgets like a laptop. He explains that mobile phone which most students access the internet is not the most suitable medium to conduct a class; a laptop is a more suitable device' (2020: 19).

Another obstacle that is being faced by the middle and lower-middle-class students is that they are unable to use smart devices to connect online teaching, and they need to use a better device to concentrate on their educational syllabus. Meo and Chanchal in their empirical study on the education of marginalized social groups in two districts of Haryana have noted

that 'Lack of smart mobile phones, optimum internet bandwidth, and sustained electricity supply are the most common concerns in the rural areas (2021: 71). The basic barriers to this are lack of awareness or illiterate parents to help their children to operate the devices. Similarly, Mahapatra and Sharma (2021: 397) have highlighted that 'many parents do not have time or necessary education to assist their children with the projects or assignments that were previously taken care of by their teachers. This is likely to lead to frustration and burnout amongst caregivers and disruption in the academic activities of the children, leading to stress in both parents and children. The significant aspect of a hurdle is not only access to technical tools but also the poor connection of electricity and internet in various regions of India. The socioeconomic and geographical barrier for the students to access basic education during the time of pandemic (ibid., 398). Thus, the affordability and accessibility of technological devices (particularly mobile phones and Laptops) with internet access among students is one of the major aspects of Online Learning. Rashid and Yadav have highlighted that there is vast 'digital inequality that exists in society' (2020: 341). In a country like India where the majority of the population is suffers from poverty is it difficult to imagine all students as well as educators having access to an internet facility and associated devices outside their schools/colleges and universities to be able to communicate properly. In the absence of adequate social welfare and policy measures at governmental and institutional levels, this could lead to a severe mental health crisis amongst the young, further weakening their academic prospects leading to a vicious cycle of mental disorders, academic underachievement, and poor socio-occupational functioning (Mahapatra and Sharma 2021: 398). Gurukkal has aptly argued that Institutions and Governments have to bring about necessary changes in the organizational structure for facilitating the new normal in the higher education domain (2020: 96).

State Measures to mitigate pandemic induced Education Crisis: Indian Context

The government of India has launched PRAGYATA Guidelines for Digital Education (2021) during the second wave of Pandemic. The guideline accepts the classroom education couldn't be replaced by online education. Ministry of Education has taken various steps such as 'PM e-vidya Yojna' government has launched this policy to make sure better attainment of digital education during the pandemic situation (Ministry of Education, GoI 2021). Under which several digital platforms are counted like; Diksha (Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing) has introduced for the purpose to provide e-content for teachers to teach in schools from 1-12 level of education. This platform has focused on school education and is called 'One Nation; One Digital Platform'. Another effective initiative for online teaching and learning program is 'SWAYAM', launched with an aim to achieve 'access, equity, and quality in education through the access of digital resources to all disadvantaged children,

to achieve best teaching-learning practice via online mode. The platform also contains various courses via online mode. The platform includes content provided by NPTEL, IITs, UGC, IGNOU, CSE among others. Another initiative in this regard includes extensive use of radio, community radio, and podcasts to reach those areas where online accessibility is in poor condition. 'E-Textbook' that is provided by various web-portals such as e-Pathshala are very important for online/ digital teaching-learning. One can also see PRAGYATA guidelines (2021) in this regard. The significant steps of government can also be analyzed through the National Education Policy 2020 that has looked into developing and promoting digital education in India and coping with the fact of the digital divide as well. The policy clearly states that 'the benefits of online/digital education cannot be leveraged unless the digital divide is eliminated through concerted efforts, such as the Digital India campaign and the availability of affordable computing devices (Ministry of Human Resources Development, GoI 2020: 58). By this, it can be argued that particularly students are facing issues with being marginal to use online technologies but also teachers and other school staffs also having the challenges to regulate office and teaching work in the same situation. As far as online mode of teaching is concern, it is good till the pandemic situation only but is not the perfect substitute of the offline or face to face teaching method.

Conclusion

The objective of the paper was to delve into the ramifications of the COVID-19 in the educational sphere. It is very clear that COVID-19 has hugely affected the education sector. It is pertinent to note that as the protection and promotion of health and livelihood were the top priorities during the whole pandemic period, somewhere down the line educational concerns were left behind. It created crisis among students across the countries around the globe. As of now, when countries everywhere are in the process of recovering from the ill effects of the COVID-19 situation, the education sector is still struggling to come back to its normal pace. The pandemic has also brought several pedagogical challenges along with the adoption of new technological assets in the teaching and learning process. The issue that is to be considered here is that the lack of knowledge of using the technological devices and infrequent internet connectivity both on the sides of teachers and students have hindered the educational system as a whole. The pandemic has negatively affected and has also affected their extra-curriculum activity. Moreover, in rural India, many students do not have adequate resources to buy either phones, laptops, or to buy sufficient internet plans to support the online classes, which has created unnecessary stress to both parents and students. The paper is of opinion that though the Online mode of learning is good for the short-term implication, yet it should not be considered fruitful for the long term. It is not feasible to practice online learning with the diverse socio-economic problems being faced by the students. Hence, the opening of educational institutions with all

precautionary measures to avoid the spread of COVID-19 is the need of the hour.

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