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WOES OF ONLINE EDUCATION IN ENGLISH MEDIUM SCHOOLS: REFLECTIONS FROM LOWER INCOME GROUPS OF ASSAM

Abstract

The article aims to uncover the challenges faced by the learners and their parents in response to the sudden transition from offline to the online mode of education during the Covid-19 Pandemic, especially among the people from the lower-income groups in Assam. Aspirations among lower-income families in sending their children to English medium schools and the challenges faced by them to support the schooling of their wards during the Pandemic forms the mainstay of the article. The initiatives put forth by the schools and the government are explored to understand how these efforts are faring in ameliorating online school-related problems faced by such households.

Keywords: Online education, low-income group, Access to Education, Basic Education, Learning Opportunities, Equitable opportunities, Covid-19 Pandemic

Introduction

Education over the years has changed its meaning in multiple ways. It has been dynamic both in terms of reception and transmission of knowledge. In this process, language played a crucial role as a mode of communication. It not only facilitated exchange but also helped in developing intersubjectivities and the creation of a dialogue. At this juncture which language occupies the highest position becomes a point of inquiry. In India English, as a language occupies a privileged position as it is believed to be spoken by a particular class of people who garner cultural capital through the language which helped them with social mobility. The cultural capital of English helps in establishing 'networks' to access career opportunities with economic and social benefits. To this, the physical classrooms add up, the classrooms in this context were living realities that manifested different forms of heterogeneity in terms of ideas, questions, and production of knowledge systems. As students and

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teachers from different socioeconomic backgrounds interacted in such spaces. These were spaces where people with different aspirations interacted. The idea of the physical classroom was completely rebuked with the onset of the Covid 19 pandemic. Virtual classrooms and online meetings became the new-age modes of knowledge production. The online school system became a significant aspect of the lives of children and parents in India and elsewhere during the Pandemic. For many, this was the first time they were bound to access education in an online form, which presented them with a range of learning opportunities and challenges. However, not all categories of households faced similar challenges, mainly due to different socio-economic backgrounds. While the offline mode of classrooms did adhere to the protocols of the world health Organization it did create a lot of barriers in access vis-à-vis aspirations of the citizens.

The primary intent was to uncover the challenges of carrying out and aiding online schooling of lower-income group families. Studies (Kundu 20202; Mazumdar 2020) have shown that online schools hampered educational prospects in India and elsewhere due to the shift. This study aimed to explore the challenges of carrying out online schooling in India per se and examine the experiences of a particular group of people- the plight of those families from lower-income groups of Assam. They sent their wards to English medium schools. While studies on education have abounded, for instance, scholars like Durkheim while addressing education did not only refer to it as a means of providing shared values and meanings to attain a form of solidarity (Pickering et al 1998). It was also seen as a tool which helped in socialization and social integration. It further, help transmit certain kinds of skill sets for enhancing the diversity of the workforce in an industrial setup. Critiquing the idea of mass schooling (Illich, 1971) and the production of one kind of narrative suggests a model of learning where informal networks and voluntary relationships help in transferring skill sets and knowledge. Such strands reflect that education may create a kind of solidarity, yet the process of standardization creates a lot many inequalities and disparities (Pathak, 2021). The creation of online classrooms in this regard has created a new standardization that was not equal across the groups. It had a different impact on the first-generational learners attending English medium schools, parents of these children do not have any grasp of English, adding yet another layer of challenge. It doubly burdened them as they were utterly unable to help their wards in their online school during the Pandemic as it was conducted in English. They did not complete schooling but harbored an aspirational goal of seeing their children study in an English medium school. They associate such education with greater career prospects and thus social mobility. Lack of knowledge of English made such parents significantly disadvantaged when trying to aid their children in their online school, which was conducted in English. They also faced other difficulties that have been documented by earlier studies on the woes of online schools, such as access to electronic devices and digital illiteracy, which were

exacerbated due to their financial constraints. Initiatives by schools and the government in Assam are also examined to understand how these efforts fared in ameliorating online school-related problems faced by such households. Thus, the article focuses on the inequalities in the online education system and the aspirations among parents from lower-income groups and the challenges they face in their lives.

Methods

For this study, 20 respondents were contacted. They belonged to the informal sector of the economy and worked as drivers, household helpers, and vendors with an income of Rs 8000-10000 per month. The parent's education level varied from class 5 to class 9 in non-English medium schools. Small-scale interactions were held with 20 such people, out of which 8 were women (household helpers-5, vendors-3) and 12 were men (household helpers-2, vendors- 5, drivers- 5). The sample was collected from the districts of Dibrugarh (50%) and Sonitpur (50%), located in Assam. They were asked about their experiences providing online schooling for their children from April 2020 to April 2021. Their children study in classes ranging from 1 to 9. The interactions with 40% were carried out via phone as they were hesitant to meet physically due to covid-19 concerns. 60% of the interviews were carried out in a face-to-face manner. The article first looks at the challenges of online schooling faced by lower-income groups and contextualizes them and the respondents' experiences in this study. Secondly, it examines the difficulties faced by these families in supporting their children who attend English medium schools.

Challenges of Online schooling

Shifting online

The Covid-19 Pandemic led the governments of many countries, including India, to take decisions to lock down the country, including the closing of schools to prevent the spread of the disease. While students and teachers could no longer go to physical schools, they had /were supposed to shift online without much preparation for this fundamental change. The main reasons to change to online mode were the possibility of a long duration of the closure, not being certain about when they would reopen, constricted academic calendar probability and learning discontinuity from such conditions (Reddy et al. 2020). Moreover, completion of syllabus, evaluation, and promotion to higher classes were other reasons that pressured experts and policymakers to suggest a shift to an online model as a solution (Biswas 2020). The new National Education Policy of India, released in July 2020, promoted the adoption of online education as a game-change in the educational process. (EPW Engage 2021a)."

Since the Pandemic, schools have been advised to proceed with the syllabus through virtual lectures and massive open -online courses in India.

Still, in several cases, both teachers and students lacked the requisite digital infrastructure to enable meaningful teaching and learning opportunities (Kundu 2020). Online education was touted as TINA—there is no alternative to it- but research has shown that 'online' school presents problems for students and their parents. While there was an obvious adjustment problem for students, teachers, and school administrations to adapt to the online system on account of hitherto not being used to such a system, several other challenges arose once this system was enforced. It has been stressed that the decision to implement an online school was taken without considering the poor nature of digital infrastructure and the lack of skill and familiarity among teachers and students in functioning online (Reddy 2020).

Low internet density in India

One of the main problems was access to the Internet. It has been noted that many households, especially those in rural areas and the poor in urban areas, do not have access to Internet-enabled devices and lack electricity and the wherewithal to access the Internet per se to attend school in a virtual form (EPW Engage 2021a, Cherian 2021). India has the second-largest internet user base of over 630 million subscribers (Devara 2020). Thus about 49.80% of India's population access the Internet (Devara 2020). The rest of the 51.20% of India's population does not have access to the Internet (Devara 2020). The National Statistical Office (NSO), under the guidance of the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MOSPI), in 2017–18, showed that across India, only 23.8 per cent of households had internet facilities, with a coverage of 42 per cent among the urban areas and 14.9 per cent among the rural (Mazumdar 2020).

Internet service users in the Northeast lag behind the rest of the country. On 30 July 2017, Ravi Shankar Prasad, Minister of Electronics and Information Technology and Law and Justice, announced the vision of Digital Northeast 2022 to enhance people's lives in Northeast India in the digital model to ensure inclusive and sustainable growth (Mazumdar 2020). According to data released in 2018, only 35 per cent of people in the northeast was covered by the internet while 8600 villages suffered from a lack of mobile communication (Kalita 2018)." Overall, areas some areas receive less reliable internet, especially those in hill tor rural tracts and low-income families (Parsheera 2019).

In our survey, 10 of the respondents noted that they did not have/use the Internet on their mobile phones before the lockdown. They indicated that they had to seek help to activate the Internet and recharge their phones during the lockdown. The other 10 noted that they had Internet on their phones, but the recharge on that would often lapse before the lockdown as they were not bound to use the Internet. Post-lockdown, they stated that there was not even one day when they were not connected to the Internet, which enforced an

entirely new dynamic in their homes which began to revolve around phone usage.

Internet-related woes of students

Online schooling is fundamentally dependent on access to the Internet. According to data from India's National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), in 2017-2018, students with access to digital infrastructure were only about 9% (EPW Engage 2019). Another study states that digital services including smartphones was accessed by only 25 per cent of students in India as of 2017-2018. Among current students, the top income groups and those from advantaged social groups have the highest access to computers with the Internet (Reddy 2020).

Access to computers with internet facilities was only 8% among the Other Backward class and only 2% among the poorest income groups. Equitable opportunities in access were found to be equally appalling among students from Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Scheduled Castes (SCs) (Reddy et al. 2020). Some socio-economic groups are particularly disadvantaged due to the digital divide. For instance, Kerala and Punjab have reported suicides of Dalit girl students in response to struggles to access online education (Patil 2021). Internet access has hardly been available in schools and homes in northeast India even before the Pandemic (Mazumdar 2020).

In our survey, all 20 respondents noted a lack of a laptop with Internet (they all arranged smartphones), and they also cited a lack of 24/7 electricity which hampered charging their mobile phones. Some noted that they did not even own a smartphone before the lockdown. For instance, a 28-year-old house help stated that when the government of India announced the lockdown in 2020 March, she remembered that she did not have any money to buy her son a smartphone. From March to October 2020, her son did not attend any online classes. A lady from the house where she worked for the past eight years, was generous enough to help her with a smartphone in October 2020. After getting the smartphone, she had to go through many problems accessing learning opportunities on the Internet and operating it on the phone. Studies have also shown that many families have just one smartphone, which they are often unable to share with their children (Devara 2020). In our research, ten respondents noted that they had two or more school-going children, and therefore it was difficult to share the only phone that the family owned.

There was also a cost aspect of recharging data packs for those who managed smartphones for their child, which has also been reported in other states (The New Indian Express 2020). This problem was noted by several of the respondents. For instance, a 30-year-old driver by profession and a father of two children stated that by managing odd jobs like washing cars, he managed to earn an extra income besides his salary. Through this, he supported the newfound expenses in the family related to providing internet access to his

children. A respondent, who works as a vegetable vendor, noted that in the pretext of attending an online class, his son got into the practice of downloading games. He stated that he spent more money on recharging and buying data for the phone. He feels that his sons overused his phone and spoilt the phone battery. His son also demanded that the phone be recharged with packs almost daily. He lamented that while studies should not suffer, he was also wary of children's overuse of the Internet and technology.

A weak data signal is yet another issue for low-income people (Bhattacharya 2020). Several learners had to search for a reliable network outside their homes, which was impossible due to lockdowns respondents noted that the internet signal was weak in their homes which hampered online classes, and they could not go to the points nearby where '*net pai*' (internet signal is strong) due to the lockdown.

Internet availability is not simply about having a mobile phone with the Internet, as it is difficult to attend class or teach on the phone. This meant that laptops were needed for online schooling to be viable, which were available in even fewer homes than smartphones (Bhattacharya 2020). A respondent noted that he was using a tiny phone for his son's online classes, but it was tough to operate as it was old. His employer had given him a better smartphone, but he had tried to repair his employer's old laptop as he felt that a smartphone was not enough. All the respondents noted that their mobile phones were not enough for such online classes as the screen was too small, and they felt a bigger screen would be more conducive to learning opportunities. None of them reported owning a laptop, but they aspired to do so.

Struggles of Online schooling in English among low-income groups

Aspirations

While online schooling has been a struggle for all homes, it has adversely impacted specific categories more than others. Those families belonging to lower-income groups, where the parents do not know any English but aspired and managed to send their child to English medium schools, were faced with numerous problems. There is an aspiration among many Indian parents to send children to English medium schools (EPW Engage 2021b). They feel that the cultural capital of speaking English helps establish networks to access career opportunities across India. However, studies (EPW, Engage 2020) indicate that children from the Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) enrolled in private English medium schools suffer from the trauma of speaking in a language that is not theirs and is therefore alien. At the same time, students enrolled in Hindi medium school in Delhi, where English is taught like any other subject, are more experimental with speaking the language.

Some studies have shown that lower-income group families

want to send their children to an English medium school and do not care about what they learned in them. They remarked: "Our child goes in ABC uniform; this cools our bosom! We are not bothered about what he learns at school (Sujata and Sucharita 2016 : 29). However, our respondents had a very different approach to their child's primary education. Even with the lockdown, which hurt their lives, they wanted to ensure that the child's primary education continued. Though it was difficult to oversee their child's school online due to the language barrier, respondents were determined to continue their classes. They believed that with English medium education, at least their children will have more options in the future than with a non-English education. This showed that the perceptions and attitudes of the groups discussed in this study demonstrated a trend that was dissimilar to that found in earlier research.

The respondents stressed that such English medium schools would ensure better learning and career opportunities for their children. For instance, a respondent who is a house help narrates her dreams of raising her 13-year-old son well enough so that he can live a respectable life. She recounts how she had settled for the English medium school instead of the non-English medium government school the other children from their locality attended. People made fun of her as she decided on the school, but she was firm as the other government school was known for its 'notorious boys and inattentive teachers'. After separating from her husband, it was difficult for her son to commute 15 km to school every day, but she was determined, and she would accompany him regularly on the bus journey. Another parent narrated that he insisted on English medium education for his son, as he felt that it was the only way to ensure a better life for his child. A respondent noted that though he had to pay more for his daughter's English medium education, he was willing to do extra work to put her through school to have a better life than his which he felt was not assured in a non-English medium government school.

Access

Studies have shown that other challenges made online schooling extremely arduous among those fortunate to have access to the Internet. For instance, students and their parents unfamiliar with the online world also struggled with making sense of instructions sent by audio, and struggled to understand assignments, evaluation and the overall internet-based teaching narrative (Cherian 2021). It was challenging for students to learn in this medium if they and the teachers were new to the Internet. This burden increased if the teaching was in a language alien to the parents. A respondent noted that his child, aged 10, could not attend online classes in the initial phase of online school. He said he had never heard of applications, let alone a zoom app. Once he figured out how to operate zoom, he had problems figuring out the app's functions. It took him over a week to figure it out. On entering the classroom, the teacher began to teach, but since all communication was in English, the

child could not follow, and since the parents did not know the language, they could not help. A parent whose child is six years old noted that he could not figure out how to open an email account as he had no idea what email was supposed to be. Other parents said that it was extremely difficult for someone like them who did not know any English to follow online instructions in English, both on the Internet and those of the teachers.

A parent noted that primary education was essential to succeed in life. She felt that online schooling took that away from her daughter's life as it did not provide equitable opportunities for the less fortunate. Though both she and her husband wanted their daughter to study, the circumstances were such that they could not ensure an education for the child during the Pandemic. Her daughter, a 13-year-old girl in a family of 5 boys, said she had to help her mother with all household chores starting from cooking, cleaning, and feeding the cows during the lockdown. She strongly felt that so-called online learning opportunities took away her space and freedom, which she experienced when she attended offline school. Earlier she could go out of her house, attend class, and come back and help her mother but during the Pandemic, with the new model of online learning, she had no time for lessons as she was busy with household work. This narrative provides a glimpse into the mindset of children. It helps gauge how they understood the shift and how a gendered experience of the transition to online education was prevalent. Parents also noted Health-related anxieties. A parent who is a household helper said that his son attended online schooling despite all odds. However, he feared that since the Pandemic had killed many, he had requested his employer to hire his 12-year-old son in his place in case anything should happen to him if he contracted the virus. Thus, the fear of the lack of access to hospitals also added to parents' worries as this narration shows that parents fearing death due to Covid-19 could worry little about educating their children. They were contemplating how to ensure that their children would be hired in their place in case they fell victim to the Pandemic.

Lack of Dialogue and Discussion

Dialogue and discussion in class were restricted within online platforms, which impacted understanding and learning opportunities (EPW Engage, 2021c). Respondents noted that their children never asked questions or participated in any dialogue while in an online class. They were concerned about the ability of their children to participate in an online class, as they were often hesitant to ask questions on account of it being difficult to figure out how to do so apart from being extremely shy and under-confident in speaking English. For instance, a vegetable seller respondent expressed his concern over the lack of guidance for the child at home as online schooling was conducted in English, with which he could not help his children. He rues that his shy son was not confident in asking questions if he had not understood anything in an online

class. Another parent noted that the child was not confident in asking questions, and the teachers did not seem to want anyone interrupting their class. This observation of an impatient teacher is insightful. The plight of the teachers who had to adapt to the online class quickly and complete a given syllabus also needs to be kept in mind while assessing the hardships that followed the shift online. He felt that in class one, the child should have been fluent in English as he had sent him to a playschool which was also an English medium, but due to online schooling, his child had not learned how to read, write, or speak English apart from the English alphabet which he feared, his child had forgotten. He noted that online learning had not provided equitable opportunities for people like him who did not have the financial wherewithal to afford laptops and other gadgets that were essential for an online school to be in the least bit meaningful.

Assessment Woes

The respondents noted that the exams held for their wards online were not up to mark as the parents had to help their children, and it mainly consisted of filling in worksheets that were already sent to them on WhatsApp before the exams. They noted that their child did not learn anything during the entire semester, and since the teacher gave instructions in English, the parents could not help them out with their work. Like reports in other states, the respondents noted that since government schools did not require exams for children in junior class, this should have been the case in private schools (National Herald, 2021).

A 15-year-old son of one of the respondents lamented his parents' aspiration of sending him to an English medium school. He stated that the support required at home was missing during the Pandemic. The situation, he noted, was different when he attended physical school as his friends helped him with his studies. Still, there was so much disconnect during the lockdown that he could not even approach his friends as he did not have a personal phone, and he could only use his father's phone for his classes. The physical school had thus created a layer of academic aid for such children who could learn from their peers, which was absent in the case of online school. So, he preferred to be quiet most of the time during online sessions. Several respondents felt that their children suffered a great deal due to online schooling and noted that their test results had slipped significantly because their parents could not help them out. Still, none of them wanted to shift their child to a non-English medium school as they were hopeful that their child would be able to 'catch up' once school physically reopened. The Annual Status for Education Report (2020) indicated that children in the higher classes suffered more due to a lack of parental guidance or home guidance compared to younger children in the rural areas in the state of Assam. The inability to help students at home due to the parent's lack of English knowledge could be one reason for

this situation.

Gender Gap

There is a gender gap in digital access, which was also noted by some of the respondents. In India, only 21% of women use the mobile Internet, while 42% of men have access to the Internet (Devara 2020). A parent noted that her husband was the only one with a smartphone in the family, but he refused to give it to her 14-year-old daughter for her online classes. As her daughter was effectively out of school due to the lockdown and lack of a smartphone, she took her daughter to help at her employer's house, but her daughter refused to help her with the household chores saying girls in her school don't work as maids in people's houses. She noted that sending her child to an English medium school came with its price as it caused her daughter to be dismissive of taking up a maid's job, which was considered beneath a person with an English education. This observation is insightful as it shows that while attending English medium schools was regarded as a panacea by several lower-income groups, the Pandemic made it harder for them to cope with online challenges. They were faced with a situation where their children who attended English medium schools imbibed a disdain for the jobs that their parents undertook. This deterred them from joining the same sector, which was problematic. There were no other scopes of employment for such children who were suddenly devoid of education due to the Pandemic. Five households responded that only the father owned a smartphone, and the entire family was dependent on that phone for everything since the lockdown. Even though less educated than the fathers, mothers were as much if not keener than fathers about ensuring that their children did not drop out. However, the mothers also lacked the money to ensure that their children had access to adequate digital infrastructure to provide schooling, as the fathers mostly controlled the finances.

Apathetic Teachers

Studies (Sujata and Sucharita 2016) have shown that some academic coordinators do not empathize with lower-income group parents' aspirations. An academic coordinator noted that the EWS students' classes had not been considered as of yet, and they are focussing on those children who are able to use the internet. The coordinator continued that remedial classes would be provided to those without internet as these children were not among the top-performing candidates, and therefore, the learning gap would be considerable. (Cherian 2021). This seems to underlie that such academic officials believed that the value attached to education by poor families was low or that technology was not understandable to them (Cherian 2021). However, contrary to these observations, our respondents pointed out that they were desperate to ensure that their children did not drop out of school despite the online system not

providing equitable opportunities. They had sent them to English medium schools to ensure that they had a better life than their parents. Lower-income groups were serious about providing an education for their children, unlike officials' assumptions, as stated in earlier studies, who felt they did not value education as much as others. The steps taken to adapt to the new challenges were evidence of the seriousness of their children's education. The respondents noted that they were trying to adjust to the online mode as fast as possible. For instance, a respondent indicated that aspiration for a better life for her son led her to stay back in her employer's house and earn a little more as it also saved the cost of her eating at home. With the money saved, she would recharge her son's mobile and download some apps to help him with English. None of the respondents noted having been given any extra help from the school authorities despite their financial background. They said that teachers expected parents to be digitally savvy and act as tutors for their children and ensure that the child memorized whatever lessons were taught in class.

Adaption

Parents also tried to pursue other measures to ensure the continuation of their child's primary education. A respondent noted that their house located next to a university enabled students to help their son with the extra work before the lockdown. However, with the lockdown, extra care/tuition was absent as the students at the University had to go home, which also points to the crucial role of location in education. Since the Sustainable Development Goals require universities to serve the community, they could initiate programs to encourage their students to locate such children they could tutor to bridge the educational lag brought on due to the lockdown and online schooling. A respondent noted that as soon as the lockdown was eased, he hired a tutor for his 6-year-old. Another said that he was trying to locate a tutor for his ten-year-old and would hire one even as Covid-19 raged on if he could find one willing to take tuition for his son under such circumstances. The government of Assam had made it mandatory for all teachers not to engage in any private tuition (Assam Government Portal). However, the respondents noted that tutors were available before the Pandemic and hoped they would be available after it. The notion of tuition and the central role it played before the shift to online schooling indicates more significant problems that the school system in India is facing. Since tuitions mean that the education in schools is not enough and they also require additional fees, the challenge for lower-income groups increases due to the requirement of tuition, a parent noted: "similar to banks, administrative offices, law courts, …schools could also have been left open with at least the teachers coming to their place of work during the Pandemic and lockdown. They are adults, if adults in other professions were mandated to come to work…then why not teachers? We could have then gone to the schools on allotted times in a staggered manner once a week and to get some doubts cleared."

Unfamiliarity with Governmental and Non-Governmental interventions

Digital material was created by government and non-governmental organizations to help students cope with online education and alleviate the country's learning gaps. Interventions included **P**ratham's energy efficient PraDigi or Room to Read, which worked with panchayats, student management committees (SMCs), parent bodies, Anganwadis, and ASHA workers to bridge the learning gap among marginalized students (Cherian 2019). Government measures elsewhere in the country also included the low-cost "Aakash" tablet (Chattapadhyay and Phalkeey 2016). The NCERT also designed curriculum and content for such platforms to ensure that the learning gap is bridged (Cherian 2021). The government of Assam also undertook few measures that had been put in place to counter the educational lag due to covid-19 lockdown and online schooling.

The state government tried to aid in the continuity of learning by employing various means- Including a dedicated TV channel called "Gyan Brikkhya" to provide academic support to the children of classes I to Class XII. Radio Learning Programme "Biswa Vidya" has been broadcast through All India Radio in Assamese, Bengali, and Bodo mediums. The YouTube channel "Biswa Vidya" has been launched for students of classes VI to X with E-classes for Science, Mathematics, and English Vocabulary and Grammar. Students have also been reached out through Swayam Prabha educational channel, DIKSHA portal and narrowcast of Community Radio.

The state government also set up a Tele Education helpline with Toll-Free No. 18003453578 at the State Mission Office of Samagra Shiksha. This has been functioning from 4th November 2020 to clarify academic doubts of children of classes VI to X and address psycho-social issues of children, teachers, and parents. The helpline has 40 experts/teachers in English, Social Science, Science, Assamese, and Hindi. The time for the helpline is 10 am to 12 noon and 1.00 pm to 3.00 pm every working day from Monday to Saturday. Samagra Shiksha, Assam has been exclusively utilizing Jio TV to broadcast e-contents of Science, Maths, and English subjects for the students of classes I to X through an educational channel, namely-"Gyan Brikshya". Jio Saavn has been utilized to broadcast the audio content for the students of the elementary level. Jio Chat has been used to disseminate various information related to red-letter days, the timetable of Gyan Brikshya educational channel, etc., amongst teachers/students.

The state government also Developed Distance Learning Support (DLS) package for Pre-Primary students during the COVID-19 Pandemic. About 5,500 e-contents (Audio, video, practice resources, interactive contents) from class-I to XII are uploaded on DIKSHA, Assam portal (under PM e-Vidya) in five mediums- Assamese, English, Bodo, Bengali, and Hindi during the pandemic period. One hundred fifty-two textbooks (Elementary, Secondary & Higher

Secondary levels) are energized with 2564 QR Codes. The state government also carried out online capacity-building training for 2000 Teachers and Teacher Educators on e-content development (Audio, Video, Interactive Content, and Practice Resources, i.e. MCQ, Fill the Gap, Drag and Drop Image Hotspot). Video classes have been telecasted through Swayam Prabha and other regional TV Channels, and Audio lessons have been broadcasted through AIR in regional mediums. Under NISHTHA online training for Elementary Level in five mediums viz. Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, English, and Hindi were carried out. The academic package was prepared in six mediums, viz. Assamese, Bodo, Bengali, Manipuri, Hindi, and English.

The respondents noted that the learning opportunities provided by the government, which were online in nature, were problematic as they would face the same problems accessing them that they were facing when trying to access online education provided by schools. They noted that for any such interventions to be meaningful, the mode of interaction and education had to be offline. This is insightful as it shows an inherent contradiction in the objectives of using online measures to combat the educational lag brought on by the onset of covid-19 by government and non-governmental organizations. None of the respondents noted any relaxation in fees due to the lockdown. However, the government of Assam had ordered a reduction in school fees even for private institutions due to Covid-19 related exigencies (India Today Web Desk 2020). They noted that a decrease in school fees would have gone a long way in helping them pay for the extra expenses incurred due to the shift to online school and access to the measures put in place by the government.

The state government of Assam has planned an exercise of quality assessment of schools under a program called Gunotsav to be held shortly. This assessment was conducted twice before the Covid-19 Pandemic. The next round, as informed to the authors by one of the master trainers of this exercise, will include certain portions where an assessment will be carried out to understand the educational lags in schools owing to the lockdown and online schooling, which could help the government plan ways to bridge the gap.

Conclusions

It is apparent that the government of India took cognizance of the challenges faced by the learners of the lower-income group and has tried to reach out to them. The NEP 2020 can be taken as one such example. While the nation was prepping with the policy, it was suddenly hit hard by the onslaught of the Covid-19 Pandemic. With the Pandemic, new forms of learning opportunities were introduced across the states to ensure uninterrupted academic progress for the learners. While the method seemed exciting, the procedures seemed parched. Without basic facilities like electricity, free data packages, and parents who were not digitally literate, the new learning system could not create equitable opportunities. Matters of poverty, class, caste, and

gender further complicated access and affordability of schooling during the lockdown making online education inequal.

The article aimed to interrogate and examine the challenges that learners and their parents faced with introducing the new system of online learning since the Pandemic. This study on the lower-income groups showed that their challenges with online schooling were seemingly impossible, especially for those who had sent their wards to English medium schools. Yet, they were found to be resolute in their attempts to provide a continuation of education for their children. There is a need to explore and understand the nuances of these challenges and develop a robust policy that considers the condition of all categories of households, especially the lower-income groups, about online schooling. This becomes pertinent as online education is being touted as a game-changer that may continue alongside physical schools as a blended learning model is being encouraged.

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