THE BLANK PAGES IN INDIA'S ONLINE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Education and related issues

The world is presently grappling with the adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the social, economic and political spheres. India can be counted among those nations that have been impacted severely.

COVID-19 has affected all sectors. However, there are areas where countries such as India should be more worried about. One of them is education, especially education of the girl child. Around 300 million children across all age groups are reported to be out of school in India now (the number is of the period when all schools were closed) . And as and when schools finally reopen in the country, the number of children returning to class has to be closely scrutinised. The education sector faces the challenges of delivery, especially of pedagogical processes, classroom assessment frameworks, students' support and teacher-student engagement.

Also read | E-learning in India, a case of bad education

More than just the numbers, the authorities have to realistically assess the level of understanding of students who have returned to schools after 'digital learning' at home. This is crucial as studies conducted on government-run schools in various States indicate poor performance — a majority of children, especially girl students, have missed out much on the various e-mail platforms offered. Apart from poor access to digital data, the children were burdened with household/farm work; girl students in particular were apprehensive of being given away in marriage. There is credible evidence that students, parents and teachers were unprepared for the pedagogic shift.

School closures have had a significant impact on both students and their families, more in the case of the vulnerable and underprivileged sections. The lockdown happened during the last quarter of the academic year which led to the postponement of examinations and the curtailment of the prescribed syllabi. On their part, governments tried to put in place measures to address the situation. The basic strategy was to give a push to the digital distance learning method. The focus was on the use of text/video/audio content through SMS, WhatsApp, radio and TV programmes to reach out to students and engage them.

The Union Ministry of Human Resource Development in March 2020 started sharing free e-learning platforms. They included the Diksha portal which has e-learning content aligned to the curriculum, and e-Pathshala, an app by the National Council of Educational Research and Training for Classes 1 to 12 in multiple languages. SWAYAM hosts 1,900 complete courses including teaching videos, computer weekly assignments, examinations and credit transfers, aimed both at school (Classes 1 to 12) and higher education. SWAYAM Prabha is a group of 32 direct to home channels devoted to the telecasting of educational programmes. While this looks fairly impressive, there are many pitfalls.

Also read | Why e-learning isn't a sustainable solution to the COVID-19 education crisis in India

Studies indicate that the rapid transition to digital learning has been very challenging. The initiative failed to take into account existing divides — spatial, digital, gender and class. A recent UNICEF report points out that the massive school closures exposed the uneven distribution of technology that is needed to facilitate remote learning. The chances for an education-enabled

social and economic mobility appear to be grim in the country.

Following closure of schools, boys became inattentive to studies while girls, with lesser opportunities, were more involved in household chores. With their educational routine having been disrupted, children, in many cases, have also forgotten what they learnt earlier. Again, the decision to postpone the board examinations and to allow automatic promotion to the higher classes is bound to affect the quality.

Comment | Can online learning replace the school classroom?

A survey promoted by the Centre for Budget and Policy Studies, in July 2020, of 3,176 households of Assam, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Telangana and Delhi, found that in families which faced cash and food shortages, only 50% of the boys and girls were confident of returning to school. The abilities of the families and communities concerned to support the educational journeys of the children have been found to be affected.

One should remember that attending schools is not about learning alone. The long closure of schools has also meant the disruption of a range of activities such as the mid-day meal scheme, the school health programme and pre-metric scholarships to girl children. These activities in the past have had a lot to do with the enrolment as well as regular attendance. As for the digital initiative, it was taken up in a haphazard manner. Many States lacked adequate digital infrastructure and even teachers were poorly equipped to teach. Also, they were not consulted before the initiative. Now, the biggest complaint of the authorities concerned seems to be that teachers have been drawing their salaries doing precious little.

Comment | What challenges do online classes pose?

In States such as Rajasthan, the education of girl children is still a challenge. The State is positioned precariously — the second worst in overall literacy rates in India and the lowest literacy rate among the females (NSS,2017-18); 20% of girls in the age group 15-16 were out of school against the national average of 13.5 (Annual Status of Education Report 2018). Despite pioneering initiatives in education such as the Lok Jumbish and Shiksha Karmi projects, Rajasthan continues to flounder in systemic issues of education that relate to quality, equity and gender.

A study by the Institute of Development Studies, Jaipur and Development Solutions, Delhi in September-October, found that most girls in Rajasthan (between 13-16 years) were keen to return to school. That as many as 97% of them in the districts surveyed — Tonk, Dausa, Karauli and Udaipur — had been enrolled in schools before the COVID-19 lockdown itself was a positive finding.

However, the much touted online education plan of the State government did not work. In Rajasthan, the access of girls to education during the COVID-19 period was limited to 11%. Girls who had online access reported links through WhatsApp (92%) and YouTube (12%). The reasons for the inability of students to access online education were: lack of devices, poor or no Internet connectivity, and also girls' preoccupation with household activity.

Interestingly, schools run by the non-governmental organisation sector did fairly well during the interregnum. Catering mostly to the poor and backward segments, these schools did not go online. Instead, teachers visited individual students at home. They also taught children in small groups.

There seems to be consensus that online classes are not comparable to actual classroom

education. The attempts at digital learning have only exposed the wide digital divide between the rich and the poor and the urban and rural areas. Education planning has to be context specific, gender responsive and inclusive. Enabling measures should include access to online education, removal of barriers in pre-metric scholarships and ensuring the provision of mid-day meals, iron and folic acid tablets and provision of personal hygiene products to girl students even when schools are closed.

Also read | [Study highlights online education woes](#)

Once schools reopen finally, the authorities should establish the re-enrolment of children as mandated by the National Education Policy 2020. Mass outreach programmes should be developed with civil society to encourage re-enrolment. Remedial tuitions and counselling are advisable, along with scholarships, targeted cash transfers and other entitlements to retain the poorest at school. It is also apt to consider making secondary education for girls free. Given the seriousness of the situation, one expects the governments to keep the budgetary share of education to 6% of GDP, as emphasised by the President of India.

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