

E-LEARNING IN INDIA, A CASE OF BAD EDUCATION

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

Equality of opportunity to all is one of the basic principles of our Constitution. From an educational point of view, John Dewey, American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer, strongly argued that “[A]n environment in which some are limited will always in reaction create conditions that prevent the full development even of those who fancy they enjoy complete freedom for unhindered growth.” Another point he makes equally strongly is that for good education, one must lead the child’s current interests and abilities organically to logically organised human knowledge. This second point is an indicator of the quality of education.

Our education system was never very efficient even in the best of times. The COVID-19 pandemic has rendered it extremely biased and faulty. The main thrust of providing learning opportunities while schools are shut is online teaching. There are several sets of guidelines and plans issued by the government, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) for this purpose. The Internet space is teeming with learning schemes, teaching videos, sites and portals for learning opportunities. The content of all government sites and schemes is primarily the NCERT-issued Alternative Academic Calendar (<https://bit.ly/3kE5nCN>), videos of teaching, digital editions of textbooks, and links to other such material.

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There are three pertinent issues in this whole effort of online education and schemes that need serious consideration. One, an exacerbation of inequality; two, the pedagogical issues leading to bad quality education; and three, an unwarranted thrust on online education, post-COVID-19.

It is worth repeating a truism that calamities, be they natural or man-made, affect the underprivileged the hardest; COVID-19 is no exception. The plight of millions of migrant labourers, many of who walked thousands of kilometres right in the beginning of the lockdown, proved the point adequately. A similar but less noticed deprivation is being visited to children of the same people, which may push the next generation in a direction of even greater comparative disadvantage.

In our society there is no large movement that may generate any hope of an improved situation in terms of equality and social justice. Therefore, any positive change that might come about will be a cumulative result of the development of capabilities and grit in individuals. The COVID-19 shutdown has affected this opportunity for the poor even harder than their counterparts from well-to-do sections of society. The government began plans for students with no online access only by the end of August. The plans themselves were the usual glib talk always served to the poor. These plans assume semi-literate or illiterate parents teaching children, community involvement, mobile pools, and so on. Anyone with an understanding of rural India will immediately note these to be imaginary. As a result, whatever online or digital education is available is for students with only online access. Thus, digital India may become even more unequal and divided than it already is.

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Even if one takes it as an emergency measure (that ‘something is better than nothing’) and also accept ‘for some is better than no one’ despite it being against the principle of equal opportunity, the quality of online teaching-learning leaves much to be desired. The NCERT declares in its

Learning Enhancement Guidelines (<https://bit.ly/3iWdxWD>), or LEG that 60-70% students, teachers and parents consider learning satisfactory. However, its survey asks a single question on the feeling of students using the criteria of 'joyful to burdensome'. The happiness or otherwise of the student while learning is, of course, important, but it says nothing about the quantum and depth of learning.

Listening to lectures on the mobile phone, copying from the board where the teacher is writing, frequent disconnections and/or having blurred video/audio can hardly and organically connect the child's present understanding with the logically organised bodies of human knowledge.

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If one sees videos of teaching mathematics, science, history, and the English language, one can hardly avoid noticing problems with them. In the science and mathematics videos, in particular, there are many misconceptions and ambiguities. The emphasis is more on 'tricks' to remember for success in an examination than laying the stress on conceptual understanding.

The government of Delhi also uses videos by the Khan Academy ("a nonprofit with a mission to provide a free, world-class education to anyone, anywhere"). Many American educators have questioned the quality of teaching and have pointed out inadequate or plainly wrong concepts, particularly in mathematics. To quote an article in *The Washington Post*, [Khan Academy: The revolution that isn't](#): "teachers... are concerned that... the guy who's delivered over 170 million lessons to students around the world... considers the precise explanation of mathematical concepts to be mere 'nitpicking'."

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The secondary students are in a better position still because of their relative independence in learning and possible self-discipline. The beginners in the lower primary can get nothing at all from this mode of teaching. An example of assumptions in the NCERT's planning in LEG can be instructive; it is glibly pronounced that "for a child in grade I, the learning outcome — associates words with pictures — can be easily taught with the use of resources available from or at home such as newspapers, food packets, things at home, TV programmes, nature, etc. All that will be needed is guidance to the parents." Well, if it were all that simple, then why are our children not learning to read and write? Education does not happen in chance encounters with print. As Michael Joseph Oakeshott who also wrote on education would say, it requires well-connected, regular efforts that are incrementally building to help the child focus his attention and to provoke him to distinguish and to discriminate, and develop a habit of staying on task. And this requires help from someone who knows the child as well as understands the objective of education. Food packets and newspapers in the hands of even 'guided' semi-literate parents will be good enough to present a plan on paper, but will be completely useless for the child's learning.

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IT has been presented as a harbinger of a revolution in education for more than three decades now. However, all reliable studies seem to indicate that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the classroom helps in already well functioning systems, and either has no benefits or negative impact in poorly performing systems. That does not indicate much hope from IT in our education system.

The NCERT's LEG states that "COVID-19 has created a situation which demands transformation in school education... the transaction mechanisms in school education may go

through a drastic change. Therefore, even if the pandemic will get over, its traces will be there and school education needs to remodel itself....” It recommends that “alternative modes of education for the whole academic session including Internet-based, radio, podcast, community radio, IVRS, TV DTH Channels, etc.” should be developed. This transformation of schools in the current understanding of pedagogy, suitability of learning material and quality of learning provided through IT will further devastate the already inadequate system of school education in the country. Of course, IT can be used in a balanced manner where it can help; but it should not be seen as a silver bullet to remedy all ills in the education system.

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The importance of an institutional environment cannot be overemphasised when one thinks of online teaching. Even when the institutions function sub-optimally, students themselves create an environment that supports their growth morally, socially and intellectually in conversations and interactions with each other. The online mode of teaching completely forecloses this opportunity.

In conclusion, our democracy and public education system have, as usual, left the neediest in the lurch and are providing bad education to those who matter.

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