Why School Education Matters During COVID Pandemic in India?

K. Annapuranam

Post-Doctoral Scholar, Dr Ambedkar International Centre, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (Govt. of India), 15-Janpath, New Delhi, India

Corresponding author: anuma.kr@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Education system is most disturbed due to COVID pandemic that led to school closure and paradigm shift from traditional to digital education. Hence, the educational achievement of students became crucial where the people live in a great promise of technology driven society. This review paper identified digital learning that deepens social inequity with long existing structural inequalities rather reducing equity gap in education since the issues of economic wherewithal determines whether to prefer digital education. It does not favour to everyone, the inequitable quality learning resulted in learning crisis of loss and dropout rate in the country. The learning crisis of loss affect future career and may accrue unhealthy labour force. Still no freedom from the risk of pandemic and increasing COVID induced poverty that poses new challenges to achieve sustainable development goals, hence, need an integrated model for the technology driven inclusive education in schools.

Keywords: Covid, school, digital education, equity, sustainability

Corona virus broke out in Wuhan city of China in December 2019. It spreads to different parts of the world, that's why World Health Organisation declared as a global pandemic on 12 March 2020 (Fakhruddin, *et al.* 2020). In India, the first corona case was found on 30th January 2020, and went into a lockdown from 23 March 2020. Such health crisis is never witnessed in history that led to unprecedented challenges to social systems. Although, the health crisis burden is shared by all the people; the pandemic affects more socially disadvantaged, weaker sections and minorities. The exposure to

infection is unequal it is even seen in developed countries such as United Kingdom and United States of America, the morbidity and mortality due to corona is high among ethnic minorities as compared to other section of the society (Kundu *et al.* 2020; Holmes, *et al.* 2020; Whitehead *et al.* 2020). The scenario varies in India with respect to caste differentials of corona morbidity and mortality is unclear due to lack of caste segregated data.

As documented by Yan *et al.* (2020) countries responded differently to the pandemic as it is largely depends upon the contextual factors, institutional arrangements, national cultural orientation, socio-economic development, welfare policies, and resources at hand were different to each country. While some countries chose the option of lockdown, some countries managed with strict adherence to the COVID protocol. India is opted lockdown as it is third worst affected country. Policy report (2020) the stringent lockdown under Disaster Management Act 2005 restricted physical movement of the people, and section 144 of the IPC empowers authorities to take action against those indulged in spread of disease. With these legal measures government imposed lockdown repetitively that invariably affected entire population of the country. When the country struggled to contain the first wave of pandemic, the second wave began, resulting in massive infections and the loss of countless lives.

The lockdown suspended economic activities except essential services, suspension of offline teaching, no entertainment places open, tourism heavily restricted, shrines closed, etc. This has an indirect effects too because long existing structural inequalities, and developmental gaps on various parameters including health, education, employment, income, and politics. In the given situation the educational sector behind the health and economic sector is most disturbed because of school closure and paradigm shift from traditional to digital learning. The children suffer from global health crisis, and their educational achievement on the other side became crucial. The objective is to understand the needs and expectations of school going children, which in turn captures self-efficacy of parents and educational achievement of children during pandemic. This also explores the impact of school closure, and the reasons why disadvantaged students are not able to access digital devices, low educational status, and spend more of their lives in poverty.

Why School Education Matter?

Education viewed as a tool to upliftment of the down trodden, instrument to reduce inequality, promotes class mobility and enhances the quality of life. UNICEF report says global health crisis led to closure of schools in 188 countries despite less infected cases among children below 18 years. On the other hand, the pandemic pushed more than 142 million children into poverty in developing countries, which could reach 725 million children in the absence of appropriate policy measures. Nearly, two-thirds of these children live in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. This condition is further harmful to the education of disadvantaged children as it is paved the way for digital learning, one-third of the world's school children (463 million) could not access to online learning, and many unable to afford digital devices. The shift from offline to online learning is resulted in drop out of school and engaging in a variety of economic activities to support their parents. Even during pre pandemic, as reported by UNICEF 255.4

million children out of school under 18 years in 2018. Sub-Saharan Africa is the highest out of school children for all age groups followed by Southern Asia. As consequence, the international organisations, civil society organisation and respective government have made several initiatives for mainstreaming out of school children, but the poor implementation makes things worse rather than better.

Theoretical Underpinnings

The lesson from COVID experience explains obvious need of children and parents to stay at home. It informs policy and implementation is critical in the given context of COVID pandemic. The loss of education impairs child welfare, in particular causes nutrition problem, where children depend on noon meal, isolation affects cognitive abilities, increases stress in parents and children (Marmot et al 2020). It clearly draws linkage between health, education, economy and environment in the spheres of development. Development seen as what we all do in attempting to improve our lot within that abode (Brundtland Report, 1987), which does not reflect how we can understand the development in everyday life; human life is integrated with environment and other aspects. It is vague and lack clarity as it does not lead to any meaningful analysis. While the contemporary discourse explains development as process, it varies to the place, institutions and the context.

The work of Amartya Sen (2014) describes development as freedom, the freedom to grow with the rise of personal income, freedom to access welfare schemes, and freedom from social pathology and so on. Of course, it directs individuals to grow, for which agency as a major engine, which should be sustainable, but identifying the need is inadequately discussed as a basic element of development. Indeed, the need denotes essential needs of world's poor are widely recognized by the sustainable paradigm (Brundtland Report, 1987). While the concept of sustainability attracts serious criticism, the pandemic altered entire social system as the way it functions and the requirement arouse to educational institutions to be receptive in fulfilling the needs of the students. Therefore, the institutions adopted online education, but the question is whether does it reached everyone, if not, why? Is it sustainable? Of course, no instant answer as it depends on technology and how does technology fill the equity gap in education while COVID push many into poverty is called "COVID induced poor" and those already poor are into "extreme poverty". In the given context of alternate education strategies how can we ensure equitable and inclusive education that promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

The policy ensures free and compulsory education with incentives, but the incentives does not cover primary and secondary school children except free book, uniform, chapel and noon meal. Other schemes like marriage assistance promote girls' education and reduce gender gap in schools, but still far from what expected. It was expected when the pandemic situation will come under control, and online teaching will turn to offline. But the severity of COVID situation may lead to third wave and that continue to affect offline teaching and learning. The issue has directly linked to the sustainable development goals on poverty, quality education, employment, and reduction of inequalities. Indeed, the education leads to economic prosperity and that shape the lives of people. The pressing issue is education system collapsed and not given much attention to online learning of socially disadvantaged

children because of their deprived state. The bio-social condition further widens the gap between social groups in educational achievement. These issues in the given context of global pandemic tried to be addressed here, and understanding the challenges that pose education system at the global, transnational and national level. The outcome of further analysis would help us to make a strategic intervention for prevention of academic failure and dropout during the pandemic crisis.

Methodology

The source of information is based on the theoretical and empirical evidences are collected from various databases such as government reports, journal articles, e-contents and so on. The information are systematically analysed by comparing school students from different classes across time and space during pandemic. The main criteria for reviewing literature is the work dealt with the impact of school closure, how do students manage with online education system, why does students lag behind in educational achievement during pandemic, what are the barriers that deprives students in accessing online education? And why do families from disadvantaged groups still many live in poverty and not benefited out of digital learning? The analysis is presented in various sections: introduction, why does school education matters? theoretical underpinnings, methodology, school education pre-COVID era and post COVID era, advantages and disadvantageous of online education system, policy implications and concluding remark.

School Education in Pre COVID Era

Even before COVID-19 the extremely disturbing scenario in education among socially disadvantaged groups enabled the government to introduce RTE 2009 in order to promote free and compulsory education, universal primary education, equality, and inclusive development (The Gazette of India (2019), but nowhere in actions and accountability as expected. The socially disadvantaged are most deprived of education as compared to other sections. There are 16.63 per cent of them scheduled caste while 8.6 per cent of them constitutes scheduled tribe to the total population of India. In the context of education, the data analysis from Census (1991, 2001, and 2011) and National Sample Survey (71st round) shows considerable progress towards gross enrolment from 2001 to 2011. In 2011, the overall enrolment of SCs in class I - XII standard (95.4) shows better than STs - 84.5 and general category - 84.5. Similarly, the dropout has declined however still it shows marginal difference, it is high among STs - 54 as compared to SCs - 53 and general category - 52. The prime reasons for drop out are the child is not interested in studies, financial constraints and engage in economic activities (GoI, 2018). The gender differences, as stated in educational policy, there are more number of girls dropped out as compared to boys, but the gender difference is high among scheduled tribes as compared to scheduled castes and general category. This issue is attributed to the lack of access to quality schools, poverty, social mores, norms, customs, and language has a detrimental effect on the rates of enrolment and retention. STs also face disadvantages at multiple levels due to historical, cultural and geographical factors.

U-DISE 2019-20 discloses the enrolment ratio of students from disadvantaged groups was lower in schools as compared to economically better off, in which gender disparity shows reverse scenario, more girls were enrolled than the boys. Interestingly among STs, it shows upward mobility the enrolment of girls is high in secondary level (9-12) as compared to primary level (1-8). However, the drop out in schools shows higher among boys at the primary level (1-5) and secondary level (9-12) while girls were seen high in upper primary (6-8). It clearly shows persistent disparity in earlier days; the differences translated into inequality, embedded with social structure. The sustainable framework provides scope to fill the gap as it is linked to other parameters of poverty, quality of education, equality, decent work and reducing inequalities. But studies, Kioupi and Voulvoulis (2019) documented the intricacy of the concept of sustainability, as it finds difficulty in relating to SDGs, with what education aims to achieve. If so, how the government set parameters to achieve the educational goal on the line of sustainable development agenda, because the proposed framework may not uniformly applicable to all the countries which need to be modified according to the context, political climate and culture.

School Education in Post-COVID Era

Now, the corona virus turned to be another reason for education adversely affected the children of disadvantaged group. In India, the COVID resulted in closure of schools has affected 320 million students. However, only 37.6 million students across 16 states are continuing their education through digital mode. The ASER reported States are sharing variety of learning materials as textbooks, through radio programs, television programs and live video classes for instance, the Department of School Education and Literacy under the Ministry of Human Resources Development, Government of India released PRAGYATA guidelines for digital education, which introduced DIKSHA as platform for online classes and access materials on three modes: online (smart phone/computer available), partially offline (in the absence of regular internet) and offline (radio/television). It is further understood from the effort of the National Council of Educational Research and Training under the Ministry of Education, Government of India released students' learning enhancement guideline based on the findings of the study undertaken in Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan, Navodaya Vidyalaya Samiti and Central Board of Secondary Education developed three different models are not aligned with the aim of sustainable agenda as it does not aligned with the equitable learning.

However, the alternative model is praise worthy during pandemic. A wide range of literature shows that Watsapp became the main source of receiving study materials, but majority of children from poorer households do not have smart phone, as UNESCO finds it carries high socio-economic cost; such impact is severe for the children from vulnerable and marginalized groups. The reality reflects three crore school students do not have digital devices, Bihar has the highest number of school students (1.4 crore) without digital devices followed by Jharkhand, Karnataka, Assam, Tamil Nadu and Odisha (The Times of India, August 3, 2021). Why is this variation in accessing digital devices? A few relevant literatures, like ASER reveal that the children with low parental education are less likely to have a smartphone i.e. 45 per cent as compared to 79 per cent children with high parental education in rural areas. There are various reasons, developing countries like India attributed the prevailing situation to the lack of

access to digital device, loss of learning time, no conducive environment at home, no internet access in remote areas and on the other hand, schools are not integrated the pedagogical and technical skills with digital device for better teaching and learning outcome.

Alternate scenario is those who possess at risk of increased screen time for learning. The students those motivated not much affected of minimum supervision while those weak in learning face difficulties. This has significant effect on the children's emotional, personal, and social development. However, the development trajectory has made several initiatives for improved outcome of education system, taking the note of consultative meeting with civil society organisation/institutions on social sector schemes held at NITI Aayog on 30th June 2021 addressed the allocation of funds are incorrectly accounted, the families from disadvantaged groups still many live in poverty and not benefited. Why? Banerjee and Duflo (2011:108 & 345) asserted though there is a well crafted policy may not have an impact unless implemented properly. The schools are available, education is free upto primary level, many were enrolled, and witnessed drop out. It cannot be explained due to parental resistance, problem of access to schools or the lack of demand of educated labour, if so, then where is the snag? It is understood the persistent disparity in education between children of disadvantaged group and the rest. In the given context of increasing enrolment ratio, lack of retention, higher dropout and reverse scenario of gender disparity,the new grounds need to be explored for better understanding of how do students from disadvantaged group able to adapt online mode of teaching-learning? How far schools and teachers fulfil their responsibilities? How are the policies and schemes integrating the pedagogy, technology and skills with digital device for better learning outcome?

Impact of Online Education

The lockdown due to pandemic was a huge challenge for Indian education system in order to tackle the situation government introduced digital education and home schooling. Indeed, the remote learning may not be as equal to traditional classroom teaching, but it would have been most comfortable and cost-effective learning from home. Nevertheless, the unprecedented situation put lot of pressure on government, school functionaries and students to end up with many misfortunes for instance as quoted by Lathabhavan and Griffiths (2020) an academically brilliant girl student from class 10th in Kerala committed suicide on 1st June 2020 due to missing online classes and fear of expected academic failure that led to acute stress causes death. She has no smart phone and unable to repair the television due to extreme income poverty. Here, the new system failed to ensure digital infrastructure and not mentally prepared students to relieve from stress if they failed attending online classes. Later, the students' learning enhancement guideline incorporated the component of physical and mental well-being of students into digital education. Indeed, the academic activities should be systematically organised. Otherwise, the alternate strategy devastate the system for instance a study by Debbarma and Durai (2020) from North-Eastern region of India addressed the issue of online learning, lack of proper interaction with teacher and fellow classmates, future plan about job opportunities, mental distress and inadequate educational resources resulted in educational disruption.

While millions of people have dream of education are marginalised, Raja and Kallarakal, (2020) observed online education is one of the significant elements provides an opportunity for learning to all the categories of people. It opened up massive certificate courses, nurtures digital and technical skills, and widen the horizon of employment opportunity. On the other hand noted the issue of dropout rate, for example Hansdah and Abhilash (2021) found the increase of dropout rate with the age of 6 to 14 years, which is high among Kolha as compared to Munda and Santal from Mayurbhanj district of Odisha. The dropout rate is high at secondary level (15-16 years) as compared to primary level (6-14 years) because the key parameters of parents' education, occupation and school distance were directly influencing their educational achievement.

Disadvantages of Online Education System

The nexus of live hood and education hampered the quality of life of people. In fact, the digital intervention of learning process makes students to suffer immensely though there are lot of advantages because the educational institutions neither have not taken the account of pit falls of digital education, nor realised as an excellent substitute of class room teaching. The teachers and students were not trained in delivering knowledge through online. Have institutions impart technical knowledge to the teachers and students? Do the educational institutions know the fundamental requirement of online teaching? If so, why does not equitable access to online education across social groups. Evidences show that students from middle class families able to afford for smart phones, while many of the tribal students from economically poorer families, in particular from Kolha, Munda and Santals in Mayurbhanj district of Odisha unable to afford for digital devices. Even if they buy, unable to recharge at regular intervals which require at least 1.5 GB data per day and also speed and internet connectivity are major issues in remote areas (Hansdah and Abhilash, 2021). Although the online education is gender neutral, female students in a position to take up additional responsibilities at home is coupled with the lack of adequate digital infrastructure facilities. Studies indicates avast gender disparity in accessing internet facility, Bihar has the lowest number of women used internet facility while women in Sikkim had the highest number of them used internet facility (Navaneeth and Siddiqui, 2020). It is understood the grip of pandemic is compounding with pre-existing vulnerabilities to educational disadvantages, that intersect with gender and poverty as stated by Jones et al (2021), it further deepens the social inequalities. This issue prevails not only in India, but also in other countries such as Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Jordan.

Advantages of Online Education System

As compared to school education, the students at higher education level most prefer online classes during pandemic because flexibility in timings, schedules and convenience in attending classes from anywhere in the ambit of their comfort zone though connectivity and affordability are a major challenge for students from remote areas. However, it is most welcomed by the students at higher education level as Muthuprasad *et al.* (2021) highlighted the students interested in online learning using various types of learning applications that improves their technical knowledge is an added advantage of acquiring

technical skills, and most importantly,they learn at their own pace with self responsibility. If so, on the other end, how teachers experienced with the way of imparting knowledge to students and covering the syllabus using digital devices?

The literature draw attention to the teachers felt that technology empowers them because of using digital tools, exploring new pedagogies and using various apps and learning applications (Khanna and Kareem, 2021). The question is how do they conduct practical classes and assess the performance of maths and science students from secondary and higher secondary level. It would be a difficult task for the teachers doing laboratory experiment through online while digital education left many students with lack of language and numerical skills as acknowledged by National Council of Educational Research and Training by August 2020. At this juncture, the teachers' ability, competency, effective communication and presentation are most important for better learning outcome. However, it requires further exploration to develop a suitable model for online education that would cover both theory, and practical classes wherein students are from diverse background at different levels.

Policy Implications

It puzzles why the so called policy-makers suggests online education by assuming everyone able to access digital device, digital literate, high speed internet connectivity, peaceful and adequate private space at home while National Policy on Education 2020 is not acknowledging the issue of education during pandemic, and not provided any guidelines how should address such issues in case of any emergency due to natural calamities. On the other hand, the policy itself contradict at one place says education is public service, but it welcomes private player. This is contrary to the goal of equitable and universal access to quality education. The introduction of online education system is most welcomed, but the policy failed to address the issues of students in remote areas and backward districts (Jones *et al.* 2021). This issue faced by both the government and companies who offered online services while students writing and speaking skills has gone down, and increased drop out among socially disadvantaged groups. At this juncture, how can we see the development because no freedom from the risk of pandemic and increasing COVID induced poverty that pose new challenges to achieve sustainable development goals? Now, the schools are opened and re-learning process started by calling students on alternative days. However, the pandemic is still threat to human lives. Hence, the policy should ensure appropriate audio and video communication tools in collaboration with companies like zoom video communications or Google LLC. The usage of mobile became an integral part of human lives, the government may think of issuing digital gadgets and data pack at free of cost for the students who are most vulnerable and unable to afford smart phones/television like other welfare schemes such as free notebooks and bicycles.

CONCLUSION

The aim is to understand the impact of COVID on the education of disadvantaged children, more specifically the students from scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. In fact, the technology accelerates the process of teaching and learning. The socially disadvantaged children, by and large, deprived of

accessing digital infrastructure facilities resulted in learning loss and dropout rate in the country. The COVID induced poverty force the children from private schools to government schools due to lack of affordability. However, the learning crisis of loss affect future career and may accrue unhealthy labour force. At this point, how is the government going to bridge learning gap with new intervention strategies? Now, the schools are re-opened, students resume to schools and re-learning process started, but the pandemic is still threat to lives, while the preference of online education are most welcomed and they acquainted to the use of gadgets as stated in the guidelines for the enhancement of students' learning. The technology empowers teachers as they engaged with digital gadgets and sophisticated teaching tools with various types of pedagogy. The issue is requirement of integrated model to channelize the technology driven equity and sustainable model for inclusive education.

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