

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Indian Students

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Abstract:

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the education sector globally, leading to unprecedented challenges for societies. This research paper explores the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Indian students, with a particular focus on the challenges and opportunities presented in the education sector. It discusses the government's initiatives to mitigate the disruption caused by the pandemic, which includes the closure of educational institutions and the subsequent shift to online learning. The positive impacts of this transition, such as the rise in digital literacy, increased online meetings, and improved time management skills, are examined.

The paper also studies the negative consequences, emphasizing on digital divide that has widened between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds. The lack of internet connectivity, particularly in rural areas, has hindered the educational progress of many students. This disparity has led to some students taking up illegal jobs due to financial constraints, further exacerbating societal inequalities. Additionally, the gender gap in digital access is highlighted, particularly the limitations faced by female students in terms of mobile internet access. The research also sheds light on the mental health toll on students, considering the challenges of social isolation, anxiety, and an abusive environment.

The study concludes by emphasizing the urgent need for efforts to bridge the digital gap, maximize the utilization of online platforms, and strengthen information technology infrastructure in educational institutions.

Keywords: COVID-19, Digital Literacy, Mental Health, Gender Inequality, Open and Distance Learning, Online Classes.

Introduction

The Covid-19 Pandemic has put the education sector into complete disruption by compelling human society to maintain social distancing which puts the future of almost every country's economy in a critical state. The COVID-19 pandemic was a global pandemic of coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The first case of coronavirus was detected in Wuhan City, Hubei Province of China in December 2019 (WHO Report 1, 2020). The World Health Organization declared the outbreak to be a public health emergency of international concern after the Emergency Committee on the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) under the International Health Regulations (IHR 2005) was reconvened on 30 January 2020 (WHO Report - 11, 2020) and later declared a pandemic on 11 March 2020 (WHO media, 2020). As a result, on the evening of 24 March 2020, the Government of India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi ordered a nationwide lockdown for 21 days, halting the entire 138 crore (1.38 billion) population movement as a preventive measure against the spread of

Coronavirus in India (CNBC, 2020). The lockdown was continued in Phase 1, Phase 2, Phase 3, and Phase 4 (24 March- 31 May 2020)(Wikipedia). After a year in 2021, India's second wave began with a surge in infections beginning around mid-March and increasing rapidly, reaching a peak of more than 400,000 recorded daily cases on Friday, 30 April 2020 (Menon, 2021). The second wave of coronavirus in India led to the declaration of a localized lockdown to curb the rise of COVID-19 cases. The coronavirus pandemic has changed the normal norms and learning system of Indian Students.

Government of India Initiative on Education during Covid-19

To fend off the spread of the coronavirus pandemic, the Government of India has taken several preventive measures. The countrywide lockdown of all educational institutions was declared by the central government on 16 March 2020 (TOI, 2020). The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) postponed all examinations related to secondary and higher secondary schools on March 18, 2020, throughout India (TOI, 2020). The Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) postponed the Personality Tests (Interviews) of the candidates of the Civil Services (Main) Examination, 2019 (UPSC website). Similarly, most of the state Governments and other educational boards postponed examinations due to the outbreak of COVID-19. Most of the state government ministries have instructed the schools to hold all their classes online to ensure that the lockdown did not affect the academic activities of schools and colleges. The lockdown forces the fast adoption of digital technology. “The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) has made several arrangements, including online portals and educational channels through Direct to Home TV, Radios for students to continue learning. During the lockdown, students are using popular social media tools like Google Meets, WhatsApp, Zoom, Telegram, Youtube Live, Facebook Live, etc. for the online teaching-learning system.” (Jena, 2020).

The initiatives of MHRD for Higher Education during COVID-19 are listed below:

- **Swayam** is the national online education platform hosting over 1900 courses covering both school (classes 9- 12) and higher education (undergraduate, postgraduate programs) in all subjects including engineering, humanities, social sciences, law, and management courses. (Swayam Central, 2023)
- **Swayam Prabha** is an educational channel that is connected with 40 DTH channels and 120600 plus number of titles. It is devoted to telecasting high-quality educational programs on a 24X7 basis using the GSAT-15 satellite. The contents are provided by NPTEL, IITs, UGC, CEC, IGNOU, and NCERT. Swayam Prabha is maintained by INFLIBNET (Swayam Praba, 2023)
- **PG Pathshala** is for postgraduate students. It is an initiative of the Ministry of Human Resource and Development under its National Mission on Education through ICT (NME-ICT) being executed by the University Grant Commission.

Positive Impact on Students

Rise of Digital Literacy: The fundamental changes in the education sector in the wake of COVID-19 have forced over 32 crores of students to learn while staying at home through digital mediums, (Satyam, 2021) consequently leading the students to learn and use digital technology and resulted in increasing the digital literacy.

Rise in Online Meetings: The pandemic has created a massive rise in virtual meetings, webinars, and e-conferencing opportunities in the student community. The teacher and students have used the virtual meetings for teaching and clearing doubts related to courses.

Time Management: During the COVID-19 Pandemic, Students can manage time with ease and efficiently due to online education. It has also increased the skill of time management in the Indian students considerably.

Widen the sharing of information through electronic media: Students are sharing materials of learning easily and the related queries are resolved through e-mail, phone calls, using multiple social media, such as Facebook Messengers, Whatsapp, or Telegrams.

Demand for Open and Distance Learning (ODL): During the pandemic situation most of the students preferred ODL mode as it encourages self-learning providing opportunities to learn from diverse resources and customized learning as per their needs.

Negative Impacts of COVID-19 on Students

The UNESCO report notes that more than 150 crore students across 191 countries have been severely impacted by the closure of educational institutions due to the coronavirus pandemic. In India, over 32 crore students are affected by the restriction and the nationwide lockdown. More than 13 crore children fall in the bracket which will write the board exams (Sharma, 2020)

The Ministry of Education, the Government of India and almost all state government ministries have taken measures to ensure that the academic activities of schools and colleges did not blemish during the lockdown, they instructed the schools and colleges to hold classes online. But, due to the widening gap in society per family income, digital gadgets, with the majority of Indian students without the capacity to buy an internet connection, this led to difficulties and differences in online education.

The Gap in Internet Connection

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a new disparity in Indian Education, as the country moves towards classes being held online, students from the upper-middle class and well-off families do get the education when the students from other ends are facing the problem without access to an Internet connection. A recent survey by Learning Spiral revealed that Only 27% of Indian households have access to the internet. (INDIATODAY, 2020)

Force to Take up an Illegal Job

A group of children pours into the street, in the outskirts of the city of Tumakura. They are not going to school, each child carries a filthy plastic sack, instead of a backpack or books. These children, ages 6 to 14 years old, have been sent by their parents to go through the garbage dumps littered with broken glass in search of recyclable plastic. They earn a few cents per hour and they didn't put on gloves or masks. Many make their rounds barefoot as they cannot afford shoes. "I hate it," said Rahul, an 11-year-old boy praised by his teacher as bright. But in March, India closed its schools because of the coronavirus pandemic, and Rahul had to go to work. (Gentleman & Raj, 2020)

Gender Inequality Precipitates Problems in Online Classes

The divide between rural and urban exacerbates many other social divides. India's digital divide contributes to social gender inequality. For instance, 36% of Indian males have mobile internet access compared to only 16% of females. In addition, as the male head of the family is often the only member to possess a digital device, women rely on males to have internet connectivity (Borgen Magazine). This set a limitation on the usage of mobile phones by females for any work that required internet connections. Some

villages have norms that limit women's use of mobile phones, which further hinders their connectivity to educational resources and information, and social media. This led to skipping online classes by female students. (Borgen Magazine, 2021)

Mental Health enumerating toll on students

Students away from friends, colleagues, schools, and college, staying at home can raise many questions about the pandemic and why there should be a nationwide lockdown, they look toward their parents or caregivers to get the answer. There are variations in the way all children and parents respond to stress. Students experience anxiety, distress, social isolation, and an abusive environment that can have short- or long-term effects on their mental health (Javed, et al. 20200)

Common changes in students personalities:

- Difficulties with concentration and attention
- Increased sadness, depression, or worry
- Changes in eating habits
- Frequent Changes in, or avoiding, activities that they enjoyed in the past is being observed.

Difficulties faced during the online examination

Sunaina, who is in her final year of the Master of Arts in Social Sciences at the University of Delhi, was sitting in front of her computer to appear for her online exam. The question paper for the exam was supposed to be uploaded on the university's dedicated portal at 9:30 am. However, when she logged in to the portal, at that time a message popped up saying, "No exam scheduled for today." Sunaina was able to receive the question paper only with the help of some friends over WhatsApp at 9:45 am. Though she was doubtful of its authenticity, she began writing her answers since she was worried about limited time for the exam. "By 10:45 am, the university emailed us ways to procure the question paper, but it was all hassle at this point," Sunaina said. After completing her exam, she came back to the university's portal to upload her answer sheet, but it wasn't ready to accept answer sheets from students even until 1:30 pm - the time at which students were required to submit their answers. She then ended up emailing her answer sheet to one of the given email addresses (Shing, 2020).

This incident narrates how students are wary during the online examination. The constant crashes of the online examination portal of the University led to students submitting their answer sheets through email, leading to late results which often caused anxiety and fear during the online examination.

Conclusion

The Indian students have been impacted immensely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This pandemic has created a lot of challenges and difficulties for the student community yet many opportunities have been initiated to cope with the challenges of continuing with academic activities without disrupting the students learning process during the nationwide lockdown. The Government of India along with different stakeholders in education have explored the possibility of Distance learning by adopting various digital technologies to cope with the crisis of COVID-19. The digital gap between rural and urban India makes it difficult to be fully equipped with education to reach all corners of the nation through digital platforms. The students who aren't privileged like others will suffer due to the present choice of digital platforms. The universities and the Government of India are tenaciously trying to come up with a solution to resolve

this problem. The primary objective should be to utilize digital technology to create an advantageous position for millions of young students in India. Educational institutions need to focus on building and strengthening their knowledge and Information Technology infrastructure to be ready for facing COVID-19 pandemic-like situations.

There is an urgent need to make efforts to maximize the utilization of online platforms so that students not only complete their degrees in the academic year but also get ready for the future digital-oriented environment.

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