

Chapter 94

Online Education in India and the Widening Digital Divide

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ABSTRACT

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, several sectors across the globe have witnessed widespread disruption, impacting almost every sector of the economy. The education sector is no exception to this; schools across the globe have been shut, and over 1.2 billion children are out of classrooms. Owing to this situation, India's schools have adopted online teaching-learning for children, like many other countries. According to the 75th NSS data of household consumption on India's education, only 10.7% of the total population have computers and other gadgets, and 23.8% have access internet. Based on the data, the feasibility of adopting a complete online education model in a country like India remains uncertain and remote. This chapter aims to study the intricacies of India's digital divide and further suggests inclusive alternative measures to overcome the same.

INTRODUCTION

“Education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world” – Nelson Mandela

The power of education is reiterated by several scholars and intelligentsia across disciplines. Even then it is evident that education is given lower priority in many countries. With the aim to tackle that, the United Nations member states have adopted Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted in 2000 targets of which were not met. Therefore, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted in 2015, which are to be achieved by the end of 2030, they are also referred to as global goals. SDG's are a set of 17 goals including zero hunger, no poverty, quality education and others comprising of social, economic and environmental dimensions. Goal number 4- Ensure Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education and Promote Lifelong Learning Opportunities for All, aims at eliminating regional, gender and wealth disparities and imparting quality education. India's performance on these goals has been tracked by the National Institute for Transforming India (NITI) Aayog it is a think tank of Government of India,

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-7540-9.ch094

which has been established in 2015 to accomplish the Sustainable Development Goals. According to the SDG India index developed by the NITI Aayog in 2019, Tamil Nadu and Chandigarh are frontrunners in achieving the goal of quality education. The primary education enrolment ratio in India for both the sexes in 2014-15 was 88%. At the National level female and male literacy rate was 92% and 94% respectively. In December 2019, the first Covid-19 corona virus patient was found in China. After which the virus spread globally as quick as a flash, it started as a virus that affected the classes and eventually spread to the masses as cases reached 25 million by August 2020, and more than 42 million by October 2020. India is one of the countries which has been most affected by it, the number of cases reached 7.91 million by 26th October 2020. Lockdown was declared across several countries across the globe as it was the most basic and effective measure to control the spread of coronavirus. Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted the world economy, several sectors came to a standstill. The education sector is no exception to that, schools and colleges had to be shut down as students gathering would increase the number of cases making it difficult to limit. According to a report titled “Education during COVID-19 and beyond” published by the United Nations in August 2020, COVID-19 created the largest disruption in the history of education system. It has adversely affected more than 1.6 billion learners across 190 countries and more., that is school closures have impacted 94% of world’s student population. This crisis is further increasing the pre-existing disparities in education by reducing the vulnerable children and youth. For example, children living in rural areas, refugees, girls, migrants etc, Further the report also states that around 23.8 million additional children and youth could be forced to drop out owing to the economic impact of the pandemic alone. The effect is not only seen on learning hours, but the ripple effects were seen on the loss of school meals received by 370 million children across 195 countries. Thus, leading to increasing hunger among these children, the ability of parents to work has also been compromised largely as the children are home all the time. This has a direct economic impact on the households. Lockdown was announced in India in the ambit of Disaster Management Act 2005 and the 2019 National Disaster Management Plan which deals with biological disasters and health emergency. Online education was seen as the most appropriate solution world over, including India, to cover up the missed instructional hours. Online education faces several obstacles of connectivity, capability both technical and economical and ownership of assets. This chapter aims to take an overview of issues faced in online teaching learning with special emphasis on elementary education. And also discuss the various innovative ways that teachers in remote and rural areas have adopted to impart education in the absence of technology with special reference to the state of Maharashtra in India.

BACKGROUND OF EDUCATION IN INDIA -

In the book “An Uncertain Glory- India and its Contradiction” Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen state that India has failed to utilize the resources and enhance people’s living conditions. They further state that in the long run the economic growth may be threatened by the underdevelopment of infrastructure both physical and social and the negligence of human capabilities. To understand the current education scenario better it is mandatory to take a look at the evolution of education in India. Education facilitates upward socio-economic mobility. Education perpetuates social, economic and environmental well-being. Primary education forms the basis of education and skills that an individual may acquire in his lifetime. Although it may not have direct economic returns but it serves as a pre-requisite which further facilitates higher and professional education. When there is negligence towards primary education, the

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