

Chapter 19

COVID-19 and Inequities in Education: An Indian Context

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ABSTRACT

The education sector has been one of the major victims of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has widened the infamous digital divide, which has wreaked havoc across the world. Accounting for the pandemic-induced academic institution closures, Indian educational institutions have tried to accommodate a digital medium of education to replace the traditional classroom teaching model. In this chapter, the authors reflect on the behavioral change of the pedagogical delivery as a response to the new normal, which has also put forward a wide digital disparity that entails inequities in the delivery of education to both rural and urban beneficiaries. The authors analyze how COVID-19 adds fuel to the existing socio-economic disparities making inclusive education a severe challenge, thereby amplifying the existing loopholes of the Indian education system in terms of disparate educational infrastructure across rural and urban India. The authors also suggest some potential solutions to combat the COVID-19-induced inequities in education in India's context.

INTRODUCTION

Owing to the huge digital infrastructure bottlenecks and ineptitude, India is obligated to bear the brunt of its staggering performance in its fast-paced race in the digital sphere of education. The unprecedented pivot to the digital model of education, during the present pandemic has left all stakeholders in education in a fix, leading to immense short term and long-term impacts. There is an aggravation of inequality is

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COVID-19 and Inequities in Education

different spheres of education which may be categorised into rural-urban disparity, inequality between government and private institutions and inequality among students within educational institutions.

A digital education comes with pre-requisites that includes an internet connectivity with high speed bandwidth, a laptop, or a smartphone. As the National Sample Survey Report 2017-18 points out, only 10.7 percent of the total households in India have computer facilities, while only 23.8 percent have access to the internet. What is even grave is that only 16.5 percent of the total individuals above the age of five can operate a computer, while only 20.1 percent are accustomed to the internet. The picture is far more disconcerting in rural areas. While 66 percent of India's population lives in villages, only a little over 15 percent of rural households have access to internet services while for urban household the estimate stands at 42 percent. Just 4.4 percent of the households have a computer at home. The digital divide is evident across households where among the poorest 20 percent, only 2.7 percent have access to a computer and 8.9 percent to internet facilities. In case of the top 20 percent, the proportions are 27.6 percent and 50.5 percent, respectively. These statistics point out at a glaring disparity between the conception and implementation of digital education. Besides, there is also a huge divide between the institution/teacher and recipients of education. The unpreparedness of teachers as far as mode of delivery and use of technology are concerned pose additional burden, acting as a rift between teachers and students.

The year 2020 appears like a dystopian movie. Global economic slowdown, massive unemployment, livelihood disruptions and severely impaired mental health are the contributions of this pandemic to the world. As one of the biggest victims of this pandemic, the education sector has been experiencing an absolute turbulence since the onset of the pandemic induced lockdown. According to estimates given by UNESCO (2020), 1.6 billion students are out of their classroom in more than 190 countries. This comprises more than 90 percent of the world's student population. Students worldwide are forced to sit back home, while teachers change their mode of instruction from 'chalk and blackboard' to digital platforms. While this is quite a disruption to the normal course of life everywhere in the world, the severity varies from place to place. While developing countries are already beset with serious concerns in the educational sector like low learning outcomes, high dropouts, an unprecedented school closure is expected to be devastating. The challenge is, to expose the stakeholders in education to the same level of technology access, skill and digital literacy. This incongruity between the digitally challenged and digitally privileged is the biggest reason of worry, given that the former reaps most of the benefits out of technology advancement.

According to the World Economic Forum (2020), 53 percent of children in low and middle income countries are unable to read and comprehend basic text at the age of ten and this digitised educational delivery has widened and exacerbated the gap between the privileged and the underprivileged in their access to education. Besides, 65 percent of lower middle-income countries and less than 25 percent of low-income countries have been able to set up this digital platform. For access to pedagogical delivery through digital medium of education, it is imperative for learners to be endowed with high speed internet connection, and a smartphone or a laptop. Unfortunately, only about 36 percent of beneficiaries of low to middle income countries have the access to this medium. This brings forth a disturbing reality. A mere shift overnight, from the traditional educational structure to a digital mode without ensuring the provision of the basic required infrastructure for successful delivery of the same, excludes a substantial chunk of beneficiaries from access to education.

Apart from providing access to digital infrastructure to sweep over the mess, extending digital literacy is the need of the day. Further even if somehow a more equitable distribution of access to the digital form of education is ensured, the cognitive ability of learners to adapt to this new mode of pedagogy

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