COVID Pandemic and the Digital Divide in Education: A Study of the Tribal Students in Mayurbhanj, Odisha

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Abstract

COVID-19 has been identified as the greatest threat of all times to the humankind. It has affected health, economy, trade, political relations, social customs and cultural practices all around the world. However, the worst impact of the pandemic was felt on the institution of education and, especially, among the children of the indigenous communities. Due to the epidemic, tribal children were forced to drop out and some of them never returned even after the reopening of schools. New methods of e-learning were designed to help the children continue with their academic activities and other curricular interests. But, the school closures and its shift to digital platforms exposed the digital deprivation and the resultant divide that existed among the tribal students. The present paper proposes to study the impact of the pandemic on the educational system of the country and among the children of the tribal communities. The paper is based on a primary study made among the tribal students of Mayurbhanj, Odisha and attempts to find out the reasons responsible for the digital divide and suggest measures to overcome the digital deficiencies.

Keywords: COVID pandemic, education, tribals, online learning, digital divide.

I. Introduction

The COVID-19 continues to be a serious concern for all around the globe (Ayoob, Bhagat and Singh, 2022)[1]. Though it emerged as a global health crisis, it had irreversible and devastating impact on the socio-cultural and politico-economic conditions of all the countries. Initially as a preventive recourse, governments all around imposed mandatory lock downs and curfews, adopted strict social isolations and distancing and restricted the movement of people. A structural and psychological panic was created among the people and they were forced to stay at home leaving behind their jobs and other livelihood options. Along with this, schools were also closed down and children were forced to stay at home. School closures due to the COVID pandemic disrupted the education system and pushed the future of all the students across the globe into an uncertainty. The pandemic widened the already existing social inequalities and led to further exclusion and marginalization of the students from the disadvantaged communities (Dorn et al., 2021)[2].

Srivastava (2022)[3] mentions in her study that closure of schools due to the COVID pandemic proved disastrous for the students of the tribal communities as they could not avail the benefits of online learning. This led to a sense of learning deprivation among them and pushed them towards further marginalization.

Ayub, Bhagat and Singh (2022)[4] observes that inaccessibility and unaffordability is a major issue among the tribal children of Kerala. They could not avail the benefits of online teaching during the pandemic as very few of them had access to digital devices at their home.

Ahmed and Godiyal (2021)[5] in their study among the tribal students of Jammu and Kashmir observes that they are facing a problem of academic adjustment as teaching is totally shifted to the online mode. Without access to the electronic gadgets necessary for their learning, they are forced to stay at home.

II. OBJECTIVES

The study mostly focuses on the following objectives:

- To discuss the impact of COVID on education of the country in general and tribal education in particular.
- To briefly examine the issues of affordability and accessibility of digital education among the tribal children.
- To suggest measures to overcome the issue and ensure digital parity in education

III. DATA METHODS

The study is mostly based on a descriptive design. A sample of 100 students, both primary and upper primary, were collected from different government schools of Mayurbhanj on a random basis. The researcher resorted to a structured and open-ended interview schedule for collecting the primary data and referred various magazines, journals, survey reports and white papers of the government for the secondary data.

IV. EDUCATION AND THE COVID PANDEMIC

COVID pandemic had a devastating impact on the educational scenario of the country. Following the strictures of prolonged lockdowns and shut downs, schools, colleges and universities were closed and exams were postponed. This was seen a logical solution to check the increasing transmission of the virus, especially among the children. The worst effect of the lockdown could been seen among the learners, starting from the preschoolers to those enrolled in higher education. For the first time, a digital mode of teaching was introduced in place of rigorous class room teaching (Maity et al, 2021)[6]. Educational institutions were pushed for adopting new modes of learning using electronic gadgets that resulted in improved digital literacy rate of the country. The curriculum and pedagogy were also revised accordingly and a collaborative mode of teaching and learning was adopted among the teachers where they could connect with academicians and students around the globe through the virtual media with increased arrangements for online classrooms, radio programmes, webinars and teleconferencing, (Mishra, 2020)[7]. The students were spending more time on the mobile apps like Whatsapp, Google Meet, Zoom etc. as these were the necessary tools for online teaching where they not only interacted with their teachers but also shared their queries and other teaching learning materials with their friends and other academicians (Jena, 2020)[8].

However, the pandemic and the resultant online mode of teaching-learning came with a price. Due to extended lockdowns and shutdowns throughout the country, schools were closed, examinations were cancelled and the admission process was also delayed[9]. As per the UNESCO reports, 800 million learners from around the world[10] and 32 crores of primary and secondary enrolled students in India have suffered due to the lockdown of schools. This also resulted in a higher rate of dropout among the children, especially those belonging to the marginalized community. Teachers resorted to the online mode of teaching which was truly supported by the educated parents but the response rate among the illiterate parents was dismal. The technology that was used for the drive was not available to everyone (Suresh, 2021)[11] and many of them lacked the necessary gadgets like computers, laptops and mobile phones creating a digital divide among the students (Rawal, 2021)[12]. It was reported that only 32 percent of the rural population and 54 percent of the urban population had access to active internet facility and only 11 percent of the total population owned electronic gadgets like computers, laptops etc[13]. COVID pandemic proved to be a curse for the children enrolled in government schools, especially those of Odisha, Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh and Chhatishgarh[14]. Students in these states did not have access to the necessary devices and some of them could not use them due to poor internet facility. The schools in these states also lacked the necessary infrastructure to implement the emerging technical trends of online learning.

V. EDUCATION AMONG THE TRIBALS

Education is an essential pre-requisite for nation and character building. It helps the individual to develop a human and rational attitude and prepares them to understand their environment better. It facilitates them with the means to overcome the socio-cultural handicaps achieving greater equality and acquiring wealth, power and social prestige. It creates avenues for children so that they can explore their unique needs and capabilities by levelling the playing field for them.

India has always aimed for inclusive growth and development. However, this approach failed to include the people from the marginalized communities owing to their low educational status and lack of skill and efficiency. To ensure inclusion, special provisions and reservation policies were adopted to improve the educational status among the SCs and STs (Sahoo, 2009)[15]. But these interventions could not do much for the excluded communities, especially the tribals and their literacy stood at only 59 percent during the 2011 census where as it was 74.04 percent for their non-tribal counterparts[16]. Dropout problem still continues to be a major concern among the children of the tribal communities and retention rate is also not satisfactory for the children at the primary, upper primary and secondary level. All these highlight a lopsided development in the country where the education is gaining more prominence among the non-tribals than the children of the tribal communities.

Low educational status among the tribal children is often associated with multiple factors. Firstly, children in the tribal areas speak in their own dialects and have lesser or no knowledge about the regional language which is their medium of instruction in the classroom. This creates a communication gap between the children and teachers and in the primary years itself pupils are reported to drop out (Pradhan and Pattnaik, 2011)[17]. Secondly, the school textbooks and curriculum often use the concepts, methods and materials to which the tribal children cannot relate. This non-contextualization of school syllabus and curriculum creates a sense of alienation among the students and they prefer to stay out of schools (Upmanyu)[18]. Thirdly, the teachers appointed from the tribal communities are mostly the non-tribals who do not have a prior knowledge about the tribal language or culture. This is reflected in the form of higher rate of teacher absenteeism and non-interestedness to teach the tribal students. Lastly, the children enrolled in the schools are mostly the first generation learners. They do not get any support or guidance either from their parents or other community members. Domestic chores and taking care of the younger siblings are often given priority by the parents and is the result for higher rate of drop out and absenteeism among the children. All these factors combinedly, along with infrastructural and institutional deficiencies, presents a miserable picture of tribal education in various parts of the country.

VI. COVID PANDEMIC AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE AMONG THE TRIBAL STUDENTS OF MAYURBHANJ

The epidemic affected the educational scenario of the country as a whole. However, the worst effect was felt on the children belonging to the tribal communities who were forced to drop out and take up jobs to add to the already declining family income. As the entire global educational system was shifting towards a hybrid mode of learning, tribal children were deprived and felt left out due to their geographical isolation. Schools in the tribal areas lacked the basic technical infrastructure and devices that were necessary for the online mode of teaching-learning. Even though the government launched a number schemes to strengthen the process of e-learning, the tribal children could not avail its real benefits. This was clearly showing the digital divide among the tribal and non-tribal children resulting in an ever-widening social divide. In this context, a study was piloted among the tribal students of Mayurbhanj, Odisha to analyse the impact of the pandemic on education and discuss the issues of affordability and accessibility to digital education. The researcher, along with the help of local volunteers, interviewed around 100 primary and upper primary children from different schools of Mayurbhanj district to find out the status of learning among the tribal students in the post pandemic period.

The socio-economic indicators shows that Mayurbhanj is the most deprived and backward district of the state with poor agriculture, industry, infrastructure and education. It is also the tribal dominated district of Odisha housing 53 tribes out of the 62 tribal groups in the state. As per the 2011 census, the total ST population of the district is 58.72 percent[19]. The major tribal groups of the district include Santhals, Kolha, Bhuyan, Bathudi Bhuyan, Gond etc., and the dominant being the Kolha tribe speaking Ho language. Almost 75 percent of the total population in the district live below the poverty line and are dependent on agriculture and other forest products for their livelihood.

The educational scenario of the district is not very pleasing. The overall literacy rate in Mayurbhanj is 63.17 percent and that of STs is 53.1 percent which is much below the district average[20]. Again, the research area also faces the problem of low retention rates and higher dropout rates among the school children. Teacher absenteeism is a major problem among the government schools and many of these are single teacher schools.

Schools in Mayurbhanj were badly affected because of the epidemic as the physical mode of teaching came to a standstill. The digital gap became more prominent as due to financial constraints, the tribal students could not access or afford the devices necessary for their e-learning process. The major findings of the study can be discussed as follows:

- All the students suffered during the pandemic as the schools were closed and they had least access to online teaching. They had to wait for almost 2 years for the schools to be fully functional with physical classroom teaching. This has adversely affected their reading and writing abilities and their competency has gone down. It was found during the study that a Class V student could not even solve a Class II arithmetic problem. This was also true for other language subjects and environmental studies where some children were not able to read more than a few letters or words.
- Around 79 percent of the students do not have a smart phone at home. In the remaining 21 percent households, the smartphones are either used by their siblings or other adult members who carry the phone with them all the time. None of the students have a personal smart phone. As a result, the children were bereft of the benefits of online teaching.
- About 17 percent of the parents bought a phone after the pandemic but it was for their personal use. The children were not allowed to use it.
- An uninterrupted internet connection is a must for digital learning. But, connectivity is a major issue in the tribal areas. Villages in Mayurbhanj have a poor internet infrastructure and some areas do not even have mobile towers. 89 percent of the children do not have internet facility at home and the rest have a very poor internet coverage. So, they were unaware of the various learning apps, television and you tube programmes arranged for their learning. Also, the parents complain that they cannot even afford for data packages as their prices are very high.
- No one in the sample group have accessed any learning material shared by the teachers during the online teaching process.
- Only 43 percent of the children agreed to have studied on their own at home without any external help during the pandemic and the rest were waiting for the schools to reopen.
- Government made arrangements for broadcasting education programmes on TV through Doordarshan but this was not successful among the tribal students as majority of them do not have a TV at home and some do not even have electricity connection. 21 percent of the children with a TV could not watch these programmes as they were telecasted at the time when they were helping their parents at work or taking care of their siblings.

The above findings clearly shows that worst victims of the pandemic were the tribal students as they had to constantly fight with the issues of accessibility and affordability in the emerging era of digital learning. Due to the prolonged lock down, the children dropped out of schools and some of them never returned. As most of the students are first generation learners, the children and their parents do not understand the process and importance of online leaning and preferred the physical mode of teaching. This is also due the lack infrastructure and gadgets necessary for the e-learning activity. This projects a wide digital divide that needs to be bridged if we want to bring parity in education and ensure their holistic development.

VII. BRIDGING THE GAP

The Right to Education Act, 2009 ensures free and compulsory education to all in the age group of 6-14 years but this right is meaningless when a large chunk of the tribal population are deprived of this right. It's high time that the state and the central government now think of an inclusive policy to bring the digitally excluded tribal children into the ambit of e-learning process. Some measures can be suggested which can minimize the digital gap and bring more parity in education, especially for the tribal children.

- Governments can devise policies for ensuring cheaper internet connectivity to all villages and necessary digital devices like smart phones, laptops etc. to the tribal students.
- Schools should be made fully functional with smart classrooms and other essential gadgets like t.v sets, computers, laptops etc. for smooth conduction of online classes.
- Efforts must be made for developing teaching-learning materials in the local tribal language as these can ensure more inclusion.
- Arrangements can be made for training the teachers and updating them about the required online tools and softwares.
- Community can take the responsibility of arranging classes at community halls or other places for children of those villages where electricity facility is not available.
- Some community volunteers, apart from the teachers, can come up with a follow up programme for those children who have dropped out because of the digital constraint.

From all the above discussion, it can be concluded that the worst impact of the pandemic was noticed among the tribal children. It has not only affected them academically but also socially and psychologically pushed them to further marginalization. So, its high time we think of their inclusion and work to check the bottlenecks whatsoever. This requires a more responsible behaviour not only from the state actors but also from the teachers, parents and other community members. Continuous and collaborative efforts can be made by the government, civil societies and other international agencies. Bringing more and more digital parity among the tribal children should be made one of the primary goals of all educational initiatives if we are to ensure inclusive education.

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