



IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON EDUCATION SYSTEM AND IMPLEMENTATION OF RTE IN INDIA - A REVIEW

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Abstract: The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, originated in the Wuhan city, China has spread over the seas so fast that the countries had no time to answer this call. The economies crashed, people went under lockdowns, harsh rules, deaths and all brought the complete earth and its operations to knees, with fear and uncertainty. In this aspect, when mankind was fighting for its survival, some of things, though very important like education became almost the last priority for quite some time to the people and gone at a low ebb. After monitoring the virus speed and situations, WHO and central govt. announced various advisories and a nationwide lockdown, as was being followed by many countries the world over. It was the first preventive step towards the COVID-19 to contain its spread from one person to another by avoiding contact and through the confinement at home. The education sector including Schools, Colleges, and the Universities thus, got closed under the mandate of lockdown. The lockdown effected the schedules of every students one way or the other badly. As per data on 27 April 2020, approximately 1.725 billion learners have been affected due to school closures in response to the pandemic. According to UNICEF monitoring, 186 countries have implemented nationwide closures and 8 have implemented local closures, impacting about 98.5 percent of the world's student population. Keeping in mind the state of economy and other key factors, the lockdown was later selectively lifted or eased out and measures were developed and employed to appropriately deal with varied human needs including education. In this paper, focus is on the social challenges faced by the mankind on account of COVID 19 and specially its effect on the education system in India.

Coronavirus, education, student, universities, colleges, lockdown, education systems, RTE

I. INTRODUCTION

"The coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 causes a deadly disease, COVID-19 with a fatality rate between 2-3%. The pandemic has significantly disrupted the higher education sector as well, which is a critical determinant of a country's economic future." This pandemic had created a havoc in the world especially in Asian countries. A large number of Indian students - second only to China - enrol in universities abroad, especially in countries worst affected by the pandemic, the US, UK, Australia and China. Many such students were barred from leaving these countries. If the situational uncertainty persists, a decline in the demand for international higher education is expected until disease subsides or reliable vaccine is developed.

Even, considering that the lockdown was or restrictive measures are temporary in nature and education system was closed for a short time or is adversely affected temporarily, it has caused a reckoning social, economic and psychological damage across the society and communities. It made the students at all levels suffer besides uncertainty, with a feeling of loss of direction, deficient learning conditions and environment and finally derailment of their academic or career plans to a varying extent. To deal with this challenge, measures taken to mitigate such a condition through e-learning mode cannot supplant the existing pattern or pedagogy of the education, at any level and thus, leads only to a compromised learning with comparatively lesser focus and the pressure on the study, less demand and care by teachers etc. There is also an issue of inadequacy of the infrastructure and ready material of desired quality and the resources for the e-learning mode at schools, colleges and even universities level, though some good efforts have been made to compensate to the extent possible. This issue is rather more serious at student level particularly those at schools level. Most of the students at school level have to be made ready with a mind-set for on line mode of learning and many cannot afford e-learning aids and are also not adequately knowledgeable to operate or to deal with technical disruptions of the system themselves. This problem is severe in rural areas. To add to this, internet disruption, connectivity and speed is always a problem. Besides, "As the figure suggests, as per the research by BNED, 55% of students are concerned about the lack of social interaction in online classes. A staggering 45% of students said that they are unsure about their performance in the exams. Apart from all this, there has to be a strong internet

connection to attend online classes throughout the day. Nearly 12% of students complain of low connectivity in their areas." Thus, to efficiently and effectively teach and learn through e-learning mode transition is going to take longer than envisaged.

Impact of COVID-19

There is thus, a great deal of impact of COVID -19 on the existing education system. One aspect of it, is certainly bad but other aspect, can be seen as blessings in disguise. Due to this pandemic, in developing countries like India, there has been a complete digital education revolution. Some of the key negative facets, which being regressive in nature require to be put under focus for immediate corrective action, are as follow :

1. Closure of schools and other educational Institutions:

Schools, Colleges, Institutions, Coaching centres etc., were completely closed for more than six months since the announcement of first nationwide lockdown in March 2020, though many resumed imparting learning through e-learning mode gradually thereafter. But still most schools and colleges continue to be remained closed causing a substantial social, economic and psychological impact to the students, parents, and teachers directly and to Institutions and the Country indirectly. The closure of schools, is directly going to effect the GER and the retention in elementary education. The migration of labour to villages, is bound to have direct impact on the possibility of their children re-joining the schools, whenever schools reopen, on account of manifold uncertainty and the consequential impact of economy on them. This would adversely affect the progress thus far made, in implementation of RTE.

This holds a valid justification particularly for the school children envisaging the seriousness of the pandemic and various measures taken to control its spread from one to another child. As we know that they, by nature being innocent and a bit carefree or careless in following instructions for the precautions to be taken, while moving out of home to school and strictly observing Dos and Don'ts, are quite susceptible to easy exposure. It has been experienced that the children having best of the immunity in general on catching the infection may still remain asymptomatic and thus become silent carriers, which in turn may pose a serious threat to their parents and the elderly people at home to catch infection. It would therefore, be necessary to let them be under secured conditions of the home till health officials and the government is confident (line of treatment protocol is established or reliable vaccine is available) that now it is comparatively a safer time that they can move out and be in an environment where physical exposure would not be of easy harm to them. We have till then, no better option but to continue to safeguard them and think of alternative ways and means for their physical development, fulfilment of their psychological needs and continue their education through the digitized mode either which way. The challenge, would however be, how to make it interesting, workable and effective with every passing day. Government has to walk that extra mile for extending financial support to schools for the technology immediately. Schools must on priority, take upon them a special social responsibility to train teachers for digitalized mode of teaching without compromising on the quality of learning outcomes and teachers in turn, give their best to make the process of teaching interesting, helping, supporting and involving. Parents' role is also going to be crucial in the whole endeavor. They need to ensure that they create such conditions at home by virtue of, which the process of digitized learning is not only possible but becomes as good as physical school teaching to the extent possible. Besides, the government needs to make certain that there is no digital divide between the set of people who can afford the basic digital means and those who cannot. This seems to be the beginning for the things-to-be in immediate future, irrespective at what stage of implementation of RTE we are. Therefore, prompt and adequate measures taken now, would pay good dividends for the process of transformation of education system in India and neutralizing the adverse impact on the RTE implementation.

Besides, as the schools reopen, the state governments and local bodies have to ensure with full vigor and great zeal that all schools particularly the government and the aided ones, are in the complete state of preparedness to receive and manage students with all the facilities necessary to impart learning and their active engagement including providing uniform, books, stationary and the mid-day meals. They also need to make extra efforts to locate the absentees so as to bring them back. Simultaneously, they need to prepare themselves, their teachers and the students for the digitized mode so that the whole system of education is almost uniform, in terms of preparedness and /or imparting the learning, in all the schools. It will be incumbent upon the government, to put it on its priority agenda, for the efficacy of its implementation.

2. Hampering of exams:

The summer time in our country is the exam time for students. The lockdown brought the students to a state of confusion right from the beginning as the advisory from the authorities did not provide any clarification on this aspect and suddenly all the students were promoted on basis of internals. Examination process involves a very important psychological aspect for a student covering anxiety, enthusiasm, determination, dedication and finally a sense of fulfilment. Moving to next standard without exam, is likely to build some sense of carelessness in many students, for time to come while giving most a feeling of dissatisfaction.

Excluding it as a one off case, under unexpected and unforeseen set of circumstances, the examination, which is a process that measures the learning output cannot be compromised, under any circumstance as a rule. If the education has got to be continued for another year or so, through digitized manner as a matter of no option, the system of examination will be required to be devised and conducted appropriately, to be able to assess the learning outcomes more precisely so that employed teaching methods, tools and techniques are improved to impart better learning and the students do not take the studies for granted. It is good to learn that it has been decided by the government that the examinations for this year for class 10th, 12th onward and the competitive ones will be conducted off line in the required manner. For other classes, it will be ideal if examinations are conducted on line, though it would apparently have an element of compromise or even may turn out to be a formality, if adequate commitment is lacking

3. Global mobility of students:

There is a mass movement of global students to cross countries for better education which was totally blocked in the year gone and hence, there is no educational movements causing impact on our economy. As per Ministry of HRD data, total number of foreign students enrolled in higher education was 42,427 in 2019.

Until COVID -19 spread is seen to have been brought under control, it seems government of India is likely to be cool on this aspect.

4. Digitalisation:

The pandemic time brought a basic change in our thinking not only to keep and maintain continuation of education process during disruptive time, but also to upgrade the education system employing digitized pattern and the aids. Gearing up to use digitalised way to impart learning on the concept of 'work from home' using internet and devices like mobile and videoconferencing apps, on war footing was revolutionary in nature. This is likely to bring paradigm shift in our existing education process. Information and communication Technology (ICT) is going to be the platform for the futuristic mode of education with transformed tools and techniques. We are poorly equipped as of date for such a change including our mind-set.

In this context, we need to appreciate that it all looks a bit simple and easy to impart instructions or education through the internet mode by establishing an audio video contact between the teacher and students. But the efficiency and the effectiveness of the teaching and the learning cannot be compared with the existing pattern of classroom model at all. For the present moment, it can only be a temporary improvised alternative with no other option at a considerable value loss in the learning. In fact, educating through digitalized way entails a large canvas comprising of employing innovation and the technology for preparing teaching or learning materials for different level of students and for different subjects, adapting to dynamic environment, offering fluidity making it an independent or a supplementary form of the system to support standard classroom learning. It could bring a practical approach of tracking student's needs, aptitude, behavior and the performance, creating a format of enabling study offline or online as per convenience or supporting the gap in learning. It can also be an excellent recourse to provide students a platform for focused coaching for the competitive examinations. It can be a time saver and a transparent and accountable mode of learning process. It can also help create a meaningful partnership between parents and the teacher with one goal in mind. But a lot has got to be done for which this pandemic has given us a compulsive opportunity to at least start immediately without any loss of time and gradually evolve this into an independent full-fledged mode for some and largely to support and supplement the existing pattern. Its benefits outweigh the investment and preparatory time is also not too long. Investment and the Efforts made in this direction would greatly help and support RTE implementation and New Education Policy.

5. Leniency effect in education:

Seemingly, during lockdown and even thereafter the education is somewhat being taken easy by students as there is more focus on completion of syllabus through the e-mode. Even there is reduction in the syllabus. How much assimilation of learning is taking place, there is no way to find out. Even conducting periodic exams through this mode also appears to be an easy jump or near formality by some schools. Having a right place and environment at home for learning and study is very crucial for e-mode learning. Small houses, large families, dispensation where either or both parents work from home pose a challenge for conducive environment for on line learning. Besides, since on account of pandemic situation children remain mostly indoor and feel restrictive, parents tend to become liberal for discipline, diligence, regularity and distractions. Thus, the leniency on the part of both parents and the teachers does not give right impetus to the learning process.

If it continues for more time, it would have delirious effect on the mindset of children and basic system of education. The process of education involves a demand for learning, discipline, diligence, quality of contents, right methodology and proper assessment of learning outcomes with a consistent approach. Creating a learning environment is also vital. Competence of the teachers and the intrinsic strengths, value system and commitment of the Institution also becomes the driving and reckoning force. The role of parents is the fulcrum in the whole process. Where is the scope of leniency? All the Stakeholders have therefore, to see and ensure that the education process and the system should not be allowed to a situation giving an inductive inference of any compromise under any circumstances.

6. Breach of privacy:

Since, most of the work relating to group of persons or students or teachers including teaching was being done through e-mode conferencing, the Apps used for the purpose having connections to China, were reported to be having breach of privacy of the information and personal data of users.

This aspect therefore, assumes as much significance as is the need for digitized services in rapidly changing world. Privacy of personal information or data cannot be ignored. This become incumbent upon the government, Schools, Colleges and all Educational Institutions to educate teachers and the students adequately on all the important aspects of digital security, be it the system or the software or the digitized aids or the gadgets etc. before they use it. It would save them from either falling prey or venture into any trap. It is a big task particularly for community of students, who enjoy experimentation of all sorts and also for those, who cannot afford the original version and tempt to opt for either free or copied or the pirated one. Its seriousness should not be ignored given a huge market of dubious products with unknown intents.

7. Impact on research work:

The research is also a part of broad education category involving active movement for the collection of a lot of information, data, its validation, interaction with the Guide, Faculty, and visiting places for surveys etc. This all got substantially restricted during the lockdown and pandemic related various advisories thereafter, resulting into slow progress of the planned actions.

It certainly holds, all the dimensions in terms of sufferance that our education system, is currently affected with. But since, there is not much classroom instructions and the study or the pattern of tasks largely involves seeking guidance, collecting information or the data, doing analysis and the interpretation, writing the findings or inferences and making the submissions, internet mode is undoubtedly a big support except where field studies, laboratory or clinical trials are necessary. As it is, the research process has already adopted active support of IT for the most of its modalities including information seeking, data processing, conferencing, plagiarism and publishing. Research Institutions perhaps need to recognize it rather being conventional in approach for encouraging the shift and focusing on qualitative aspects instead.

8. Health of children

The secondary impact of the COVID-19 crisis has aggravated the access to affordable and nutritious food for children.

"In India, around 20 million children under five years of age are suffering from wasting, over 40 million children are chronically malnourished and more than half of Indian women aged 15-49 years are anaemic," said the UN report.

According to the newly published study by Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in the Lancet Global Health Journal, due to reductions in routine health service coverage levels, disruption in life-saving immunisation activities and an increase in child wasting, up to 3, 00,000 children could die in India alone in the next six months.

This involves a Policy matter with equal responsibility of the central and state government. Somehow, we have been lagging behind in this regard for one reason or other.

Besides, the restrictions imposed by the COVID - 19 have badly marginalised children's outside physical activities, group activities, sports, visiting different places etc., which will in one way or other affect their health and development in general. For education, a good health is essential. Till pandemic related restrictions continue, parents have to ensure that children's physical activities are maintained to the extent possible indoor or outside under their supervision.

Future

In today's time, when things are moving fast with a lot of challenges, we have to speedily work on a serious note for the future ready requirements of the nation towards the education and the economy as both are the pillars of the modern society, which empower the nation and its citizenry. It is therefore, imperative for the authorities to take serious calls to adopt necessary changes in our existing pattern and mode of education to make it a world class as expeditiously as possible so that we take gains of this pandemic as we all know that we need to, and we can, turn the odds into our favours with unique creative ideas and strong determination.

IV. CONCLUSION

The ongoing COVID-19 crisis, which has created a new normal, has presented an opportunity to rethink the deep-rooted classroom mode of education to modify it with the best use of ICT to make learning multi-dimensional. It has been a great leveller as it has enabled various stakeholders to collaborate and assess the gaps and shortcomings in the conventional model. Research sector also needs to be maintain its active flow by new and better ways. It needs also to be ensured by the Schools and government authorities that progress made so far for implementation of RTE should at no cost suffer and innovative measures should be taken to bring back GER at the pre COVID -19 level at the earliest as schools open. The COVID-19 pandemic may be just the 'tipping point' for desired reforms of the Indian education system.

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