Influence of COVID-19 Pandemic on Various Aspects of School Education in India: An Appraisal

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ABSTRACT The COVID-19 pandemic has brought drastic changes in the education system across the globe. According to United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) 2020, about 1.3 billion learners were not able to attend educational institutions across the world and about 320 million were affected in India alone. Digitalisation of education has brought many advantages but also created a digital divide in education. Students belonging to poor socio-economic backgrounds have been excluded from education due to lack of access to digital equipment. Due to the frequent lockdowns, the social and psychological aspects of the students also got affected. During the pandemic, the socio-economic differences, digital divide and psychological changes had a severe impact on academics. The main objective of the present paper is to analyse the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on technological, psychological, socio-economic and academic aspects of school children. Content analysis method has been used to analyse data gathered from various secondary sources.

INTRODUCTION

Today the world is observing the adversities of the COVID-19 pandemic. It has taken a terrible form and the whole human race is now suffering. The quality of life of people is continuously degrading and the sense of helplessness results in deterioration of peace in the society. More than 4,43,928 cases of deaths were reported according to the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare dated 16th September 2021. Because of the nationwide lockdown most of the countries in the world including India are going through a huge social economic and educational crisis. Many people lost their jobs and employment opportunities and there are increasing cases of crimes being reported in various parts of India. This leads to the degradation of humanitarian and moral values in the society. Further, the pandemic badly affects the psychological condition of the people. People are anxious, suffocated, and helpless by observing the increasing death toll all over the world. Furthermore, the education system is also unpredictably affected due to this COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in school education. According to UNESCO (2021), during the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly half the world's students were affected by partial or full shutdown of schools and over 100 million addi-

tional children are likely to be affected in terms of minimum proficiency in reading due to the health crisis. The Indian school education was affected a lot, as it was placed at the lowest rung, that is, above 41 weeks of school closure, which is, to be precise, the duration of school closure in India was 82 weeks (UNESCO 2022), which makes one understand the alarming situation in India.

School education is the primary and inevitable part of the education system. It is the backbone of all educational levels. In fact, it is considered as the foundation stage of education, as it prepares the students for developing personal, physical, social, emotional, cultural and moral aspects of life and provides an opportunity for accessing higher education. Accessing school education is a fundamental right in India as per Article 21A of the Constitution of India, which guarantees free and compulsory education for all children up to the age of 14 years. School education in India has been included in the concurrent list as a result of the 42nd amendment (1976), thus it is the cooperative responsibility of central and state governments to ensure accessibility of education. But due to the current pandemic situation, schools and educational institutions are shut down due to frequent and continuous lock downs. As a consequence of 82 weeks of school closures in India, it has de-

prived the students access to educational opportunities and upgrades to their knowledge. Hence in a democratic country like India the governments and other social agencies must come forward to address these issues for ensuring safety, stability and harmony in the society or else the overall growth of the nation will be in trouble.

The Impact of COVID-19 on School Education

The school is a platform that seeks to enhance the latent talents and dormant abilities of the child by giving them comprehensive educational experiences and opportunities for active participation through various activities of the school. Children learn to interact with other members of school and become socialised. They develop various social and moral values, cognitive, affective and psychomotor abilities and shape their personality at schools and ultimately transform into human resources of the country. But due to the sudden rise of novel coronavirus, the school authorities have failed to cater to the educational needs of the students. The students do not get ample opportunities to explore, express and assimilate their learning because of the countrywide lockdown. Earlier it was thought to resume schools after decreasing the active cases but new variants of coronavirus are so lethal that many people were infected and died in the 2nd wave, so schools remained closed. Therefore, it is an important moment to revamp the teaching learning strategies. In order to compensate for the loss in education the institutions of education are using online modes of teaching-learning transactions with the help of the internet, e-mails, virtual classroom, webinars, distance learning, etc. Many online educational platforms like Byju's, WhiteHat Jr, Google Classroom, Unacademy, etc. are providing online education to the child so that their educational journey is continuously going on. However, it is also observed that many pupil who belong to socio-economically disadvantaged groups, do not have access to digital facilities and lack knowledge and skills in information and communication technology (ICT), are unable to use these online platforms and digital devices for accessing education. Schools shutdown led to millions of girls and transgender children dropping out before they completed their education. This is specifically true for children living in poverty, rural areas and those with a disability (Kundu

and Sonawane 2020). In addition, students are stuck at home and not getting enough privileges for exercising co-curricular activities, which debarred social, cultural and academic development. As a result, youth and students of the country are suffering from anxiety, depression, frustration, hopelessness and despair. With this background at this juncture there is a need to highlight and analyse the overall impact of COVID-19 on the technological, psychological, social and academic aspects of school education. In fact, it is very difficult to conclude which of the above aspects influence school education more, as all of them collectively influence the school education.

Review of Related Literature

According to Daniel (2020), instead of parents, teachers may be better in relieving the anxieties of students in deprived situations. There should be an attempt by educational institutions to support those pupils whose parents are unsupportive and whose home atmospheres are not favourable to study. Tadesse and Muluye (2020) observed that although distance learning becomes the prime solution for educational transactions during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, children of underprivileged and digitally illiterate families with lower educational levels have a high chance to suffer in this situation and this upsurges the disparity. Jain et al. (2021) stated that teachers who are providing online classes need to invest money to access technology, for devices, internet, and electricity. It causes extra financial burden for teachers. Tarkar (2020) opined that although online teaching is providing an opportunity for the students for learning, there are several issues attached to the new methodology of teaching. Chen et al. (2020) expressed that during the pandemic period the school children reported more time engaging in smartphone use and social media use. Khudoyberdievna (2020) observed that non-traditional forms of education allow many of the students to work harder and enter the new educational process with a new perspective. During the coronavirus pandemic online classes were taking place. However, the families having monetary issues are not able to afford the expenditures required to possess digital technologies, which led to a digital divide. Naqvi and Sahu (2020) stated that school closures could result in interrupted learning, unavailability of nutrition,

parents' unpreparedness for distance learning and home-schooling, increases in dropout rates and social isolation. Sari and Nayir (2020) opined that participants are having problems with an internet connection, lack of technological infrastructure. Participants are also unable to utilise online courses and materials and they are not ready for distance learning.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are:
1. To analyse the impact of COVID-19 on digitalisation of school education.
2. To study the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to the psychological aspects of the students.
3. To study the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the social aspects of the students.
4. To understand the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the academic aspects of the students.

METHODOLOGY

The content analysis method has been used in this study, as this paper is basically descriptive and analytical in nature. The data used in it is from secondary sources according to the need of this study. Data and information are collected by using various authentic sources and websites such as UNICEF and NCERT, reports from National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO), National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), and Annual Status of Education Reports (ASER), newspapers, and research articles related to the COVID-19 pandemic and school education and presented objective wise.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Impact of COVID-19 on Digitalisation of School Education

In spite of the existence of digital technologies related to education, they were not used on a large scale on a regular basis by the students and authorities of the educational institutions, as the majority of school education runs in direct, regular and offline mode. But keeping in view the pandemic situation, one is bound to use such technologies in order to continue the teaching learning pro-

cess and to protect the future generations. The COVID-19 pandemic has paved the new ways for teaching learning process and educational transactions. So, one cannot say that COVID-19 only has a bad impact on education, in fact it has opened up a way for the introduction of blended learning and digitalisation of education. Below are some of the positive and negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in respect of digitalisation of school education in India.

Positive Impact

1. Government of India used this crisis as an opportunity and brought many digital initiatives with regard to school education such as Diksha, Swayam Prabha, e-PG Pathshala, PM e VIDYA Programme, NISHTHA, OLabs and Virtual labs etc., which continuously facilitated the school teachers and students to access the training and education amid the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. The students who are regularly connected with digital technologies become smart and gain expertise in operating such digital tools. Similarly, by imparting educational content to the students, some of the school teachers also developed good command over ICT based teaching methods and tools.
3. Platforms such as Microsoft Teams, CISCO WebEx, Zoom, and Google Meet deliver virtual interaction services for attending class. Some of these also facilitate face to face interactions, which is somewhat similar to the regular classroom situation between teacher and students. Most of the private and corporate educational institutions have started online classes for school students during this pandemic time by using these platforms.
4. After the lockdown many school teachers opened YouTube channels for educational purposes, where they seek to deliver educational materials, notes, PDFs and sometimes take doubt clearing sessions by using YouTube Live. Hence, teachers can effectively build a good rapport with the students with e-medium in this crisis period.
5. Furthermore, ICT based online classes have both synchronous and asynchronous so it gives an edge to students that they can at-

tend their classes in real-time and can also watch the recorded classes until they understand and conceptualise the topic. So, ICT based online classes encourage the learner to self-learn.

6. Digitalisation of education enables the students to learn from eminent teachers across the world.

7. As a digital mode of education encourages students to use pdfs, softcopies, and eBooks therefore, it also helps in protecting and sustaining the natural environment.

Negative Impact

1. Although many initiatives have been taken for educational transactions, there are many cases that show that pupils are less attentive to learning and have less participation in online classrooms. Many students left the class after giving attendance in online classes. In India, eighty percent of students between 14-18 years of age reported lower levels of learning than when physically at school. Girls and children with disabilities and children belonging to poor families faced many challenges while learning remotely (UNICEF 2021a).

2. In addition, teachers of the schools find difficulties in coping with the ICT. In Indian schools, there is little or no proper ICT based infrastructure, having very few computers and projectors. Even many teachers are not well trained in ICT, so they find problems in operating those digital tools. Consequently, it hampers the dissemination of education through online modes.

3. Furthermore, affording good digital devices (like mobile phones, printers, laptops) and internet facilities is a big problem specifically among the poor class. Telecom operators charge a huge amount of money for accessing the internet but again the issue of speed can be the matter. According to the National Sample Survey's (NSS) 2017-2018 report, only six percent of rural and twenty-five percent of urban households have computers and only seventeen percent of rural and forty-one percent of urban households have internet facilities in India. In rural areas of India, people have less or no access to

broadband services. So, the students of remote areas find issues in attending the online classes and accessing the learning materials.

4. Children with disabilities who are specifically suffering from low vision, blindness, myopia, etc. have many issues relating to attending the class and accessing learning materials through digital devices, as they have problems sometimes watching and learning through the small display of an Android phone.

5. Lastly, excessive use of online methods for executing teaching learning processes makes the education system so mechanical and theoretical and there is no sign of growth in practical as well as other co-curricular activities. Therefore, the total experience cannot be provided to the students.

To sum up the situation, in spite of various efforts by the governments, teachers, and parents, most school children may not be comfortable with digitalisation of education and the online mode of learning. Moreover, it created a kind of digital divide in education between the haves and have-nots. NCERT, ASER, Oxfam surveys also reveal that twenty-seven percent to sixty percent students were unable to participate in online classes due to a variety of factors including lack of digital devices and inadequate internet data packs.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Psychological Aspects of the Students

Because of the COVID-19 virus there has been an adverse impact on the mental health of the students. As the schools are closed and there is no opportunity for education apart from online mode therefore, students are facing many learning issues. They are prone to lose their interest in education and are less motivated to continue their educational journey. Again, children are totally relying on parents for their education during the lockdown, but after tackling so many responsibilities parents do not get time for completion of the assignments and projects given by school authorities. This is why many students experience burden, frustration, and feel depressed. From the economic perspective as mentioned above, those children who belong to a poor economic class and cannot afford good internet and digital devices are

deprived from learning. Consequently, this help-lessness becomes the reason for frustration, anxiety and then they lose their interest and motivation towards education, even many of them engaged in earning, as their parents do not earn well. "Dissemination of learning through a digital portal would require access to a laptop/computer for the students, which given the disparity amongst the socio-economic strata, remains unattainable for students belonging to low-income groups" (Mahapatra and Sharma 2021).

There is a heightened psychological suffering not only because of educational stress but due to the fear of losing family members and loved ones, as much research shows that children are feared by the cases of death and being infected by COVID-19 virus. As there is no appropriate treatment for novel coronavirus, the children have to suffer from anxiety, depression and fear, which has taken away their mental peace. In one of the researches conducted in semi-rural schools in Georgia, it was found that "one-fourth of students were extremely or very worried about the pandemic. Forty-seven percent were worried about either themselves or someone in their family becoming infected, while sixteen percent had a family member or close friend who had been infected. Over half of students felt that if they got COVID-19 it would be extremely or very serious" (Gazmararian et al. 2021) The parents who died of novel coronavirus, their children went through intense emotional outbursts, which badly affected their psychological wellbeing and mental health. Some of them might not be strong enough to come out of that sad situation hence, it requires more proper care and emotional support from teachers or other elders of the family. "The current situation of physical distancing and having no access to outdoor activities deteriorates their development. A lack of a fixed routine and the attached uncertainty can make children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) feel more anxious, grumpy, restless, and develop unpleasant feelings" (Patel 2020).

In India, a mid-day meal is a great initiative by the government of India to combat the problem of enrolment, attendance and malnutrition in schools. This scheme provides free lunch and food to children studying in elementary schools. It became quite successful in achieving its aims, as it greatly motivated poor students and girl children. The mid-day meal scheme acts as motivation for students and parents from poor families, but due to the clo-sure of schools, those students are no longer getting the benefits of this scheme. So, they not only lose nutritious food but also lose interest and motivation in education, which may be one of the main reasons for dropouts and stagnation.

Therefore, a countrywide lockdown seriously damages the psychological wellbeing of the students. The coronavirus pandemic mostly spreads fear, anxiety, frustration, depression, hopelessness, and helplessness among pupils and badly disturbs their mental health and personality.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Social Aspects of the Students

Human beings as a social organism cannot live in isolation and have the tendency to interact, share, exchange ideas, beliefs and views with the other members of the society. School plays an important role here. Children in school gradually acquaint themselves with the other children belonging to different cultures, socio-economic status and communities. In this way they gradually learn to socialise and continuously develop different social qualities, behaviours, virtues and ultimately transform oneself into a member of civilised society and become the human resource of the nation.

During the COVID-19 pandemic it has been observed that students are isolated and stuck at home due to the closure of the schools. They are likely to have fewer or no social gatherings, meetings with peers and friends lead to no social growth and development. "School closures and social distance requirements that limit opportunities for independent socialisation mean children no longer have a safe testing ground for developing their understanding of group dynamics, which may limit their developing "group behaviour" (Cameron and Tenenbaum 2021).

Since school curriculum aims at giving the total experiences to the child (both scholastic and co-scholastic) but due to nationwide lockdown there are no opportunities to participate in co-curricular and cultural activities, which play a leading role in developing among the children a value of unity, brotherhood, teamwork, leadership, attitude of democracy, cooperation, coordination and sense of belongingness, etc. They even learn to express themselves and respect the viewpoints, feelings and uniqueness of others at the schools. "Co-curricular activities provide the avenues of socialisa-

tion, self-identification and self-assessment when the child comes in contact with organisers, fellow participants, teachers and people outside the school during a cultural activity" (Khan and Iqbal 2014). But due to the pandemic children lost their opportunity to experience most of the co-curricular activities.

On the other hand, many parents lost their employment opportunities and were unable to fulfil the necessities of their family. According to the United Nations prediction, COVID-19 can push 34 million into extreme poverty. This may affect a large chunk of the Indian population due to loss of employment and wage cuts. This kind of distress situation may lead to unrest. Many students in higher secondary school stage may indulge in antisocial activities like thieving, looting, and developing violent behaviour, and they even resort to violence against the government for disobeying COVID-19 protocols. According to the National Crime Records Bureau report, the number of crimes in India increased by twenty-eight percent in 2020 as compared to 2019 owing to the non-compliance with the COVID-19 norms, across the country (NCRB 2020). It can be understood that the social behaviour of the students has a severe impact on school children and their education as UNESCO predicted over 100 million additional children would fall below the minimum proficiency level in reading as a result of the crisis.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Academic Aspects of the Students

As discussed above, the COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on the education system of India. Introduction of online learning mode has been proven moderately helpful in educating the child in the absence of mainstream education, as something is better than nothing. Due to the advancement of educational technology, at least some students have such privileges for continuation of their educational journey. But in India most people belong to the middle-class and lower-middle class. According to the National Sample Survey 2017-2018, about twenty-five percent of households live in single room houses and the same survey also reveals that only three states in India have above thirty percent and only two states have above forty percent internet facilities. Due to poor infrastructure coupled with low socio-economic status, the

school students are likely to withdraw from education, as there is a problem of affordability, since digital devices like laptop, computer, mobile phone, iPad or tablet as well as high-speed internet cost so much. Although the schools shifted to the online mode of learning, those students who use the digital devices positively and have self-motivation may get a higher degree of achievement scores in academics. However, as it was mentioned above, many students may likely show discontent and disorderliness towards their learning. Therefore, it is justifiable to say that the majority of school students may show less motivation and interest in their education and low academic achievements in the absence of a teacher's guidance. Further social and emotional bonds among students and student-teacher relations have also been highly affected during this pandemic, which also may have long term consequences on the school children.

In terms of academic aspects, girls are also adversely affected by this life-threatening virus. "Among the internet users as of 2020, around fifty-eight percent of rural internet users were male while only forty-two percent of rural users were females. In comparison, there were more female internet users in urban areas with a share of forty-three percent and fifty-seven percent were urban male users" (Keelery 2020). Therefore, girls are likely to face more challenges in accessing education through digital mode. Even if they might have access to it, disproportionate household responsibilities may compel them to be excluded from education. Poor families may ignore girls' education, as no alternative earning sources are available for them due to the countrywide lockdown. "COVID-19 is profoundly affecting the lives of girls. Pandemic-related travel restrictions and physical distancing make it difficult for girls to access the health care, social services and community support that protect them from child marriage, unwanted pregnancy and gender-based violence. As schools remain closed, girls are more likely to drop out of education and not return. Job losses and increased economic insecurity may also force families to marry their daughters to ease financial burdens" (UNICEF 2021b). Hence, there is a high probability of dropouts, especially among girls.

Prior to the shutdown of schools, apart from regular theoretical aspects, students engaged themselves in various kinds of practical tasks like projects, educational tours, excursions, etc. to give

the students first-hand knowledge and experiences about the various socio-cultural and educational values of particular phenomena or natural events. But the COVID-19 pandemic also has taken away such opportunities from them, so they only have to rely on electronic media to observe those phenomena.

Children with disabilities require more attention, guidance, proper equipment and support system for learning. They are among the most vulnerable groups who require continuous guidance and counselling and care. In school they are under the observation of clinical psychologists, special-education teachers, and guides. But, due to the shutting of schools their situation is getting worse gradually. Minimum levels of academic achievement may not be possible for this vulnerable group of children and this situation may lead to educational exclusion. "Shifting classes online leads to a dearth of providing special education assistance to children as parents cannot replace special education teachers and there exists a lack of assistive technologies. This impacts development of children with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD), Down's Syndrome, and the likes" (Patel 2020). Moreover, no such appropriate methods are there, especially for assessing their academic performance, keeping in view the COVID-19 pandemic situation.

Furthermore, in schools in different parts of India, the examination procedure is followed by an open book method or by giving home assignments. Central as well as state school boards directly promote the students to higher class based on previous educational achievement records. So, students are unsatisfied, depressed, and have resentment toward the assessment boards. According to the Times of India published on September 6, 2021, around 14,000 students of classes 10 and 12 who were not satisfied with their board exam result declared on the basis of past performance in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, appeared physically for exams in Madhya Pradesh. Hence, faulty evaluation methods seem to be failing to assess the student's educational achievement level, which makes them worried about their educational journey.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be said that the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the social, economic, educational, and cultural life of people and lowered their quality of life. Due to the lockdown, there is a sudden shift in school education from conventional methods to online learning mode. The New Education Policy of 2020, also stresses extensively in adopting these strategies, but many things are yet to be done in this regard, as the Indian schools are not in a position to fully adopt the online/blended learning strategies. Lack of infrastructure development, teacher's inefficiency for ICT, lack of ICT skills among students, student's socio-economic conditions and affordability, parent's attitudes, gender disparities, unavailability of internet facilities, etc. are some of the obstacles to shifting to a new mode of teaching and learning. Therefore, a steady action plan and a proper roadmap is required to mitigate all of these factors. The Government of India's PM-WANI project is a great initiative, which seeks to facilitate free public Wi-Fi to all over India. Students belonging to the poor section can greatly be benefitted from this project. In addition to it, the government and other agencies should provide free educational tablets or laptops to the students, as India is heading towards a new era of digitalisation. The teacher education programmes should prepare, educate and train the student teacher for ICT based classrooms. Ample funds and grants should be given to the schools by the centre as well as the respective state governments to build ICT based infrastructures and strict action should be taken against child marriage to protect the rights of the girl students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Since India has a large number of students deprived of educational opportunities because of the problem of affordability, initiatives like providing free tablets or mobile phones should be taken into consideration. Projects like PM-WANI must be boosted to make available free Wi-Fi for the students. The teacher training institution should prepare the student teachers for ICT based classrooms and the curriculum should be modified accordingly. The government should provide ample grants to equip every school with the ICT facilities, such as sufficient number of computers and broadband facilities, ICT based classrooms, projectors, as well as digital boards, etc. Again, for the sake of education of the special needs children, special needs teachers can build a good rapport with their parents and accordingly train them to take the initiative in educating their child. Keeping in view the

psychological well-being of the students, there must be a provision for guidance and counselling through online mode, so students protect and preserve good mental health. Moreover, parents and the elders of the family should give proper care and emotional support to the child and try to build good health habits and mental practices like meditation, yoga and other physical activities. It will help them in coping with the adversities of the pandemic situation. To prevent the bad impact of social isolation, teachers can organise online discussions, forums for sharing and interacting with each other's opinion on particular social issues. Organising cultural competitions through the online medium will also be suitable here.

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