

Impact of COVID-19 on Education and Health of Children and Youth in India

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ABSTRACT COVID-19 brought lockdown with it in India. This study discusses about different aspects of the problems faced by the children in India during the lockdown. This study relies on descriptive secondary data. The methodology used was a thorough review of the literature, with a focus on the study design, research strategy, data quality, and analysis of various reported data. The paper is divided into two parts. a) To assess psychological health of children and youth; b) To analyse overall positive and negative impact of COVID-19 on school going children and youth. Students struggled a lot with rural school education infrastructure where the digital divide is clearly visible. Children and youth faced psychological ailments and supportive schemes like mid-day meals almost collapsed during the COVID-19. In conclusion the researchers found educational system of India entered a new era as a result of the transformation. The education system is going through a huge turmoil due to technology engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Outbreak of deadly corona virus brought lockdown with it in India. On 23rd March 2020, the whole country came to a standstill. It had wide ranging effects on almost all the people in the country. Children and youth are one of the most affected groups among them. Every other age group are mature enough to deal with their problems and if not, they know where to go for help, or at least they can figure out that they are having some problems. Same is not the case with the children. Among children, there are also different strata that are affected differently.

Education, a crucial factor in shaping a nation's future, has been greatly impacted by the extended closure of schools and the abrupt transition to online learning. In India, there is a significant disparity in access to technology and internet connectivity, resulting in a considerable decline in learning outcomes. This issue has had a particularly detrimental impact on children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The disruption of formal education has also had an impact on the overall growth of children and youth, including their social and emotional well-being.

Phased unlocking of the country started from June 2020 but there was still a lot of ambiguity

on the reopening of the educational institutes. Children faced many problems from psychological to physical health and many more (Kumar et al. 2020b; Mahapatra and Sharma 2021). Changes in learning methods also posed many challenges to the children and their parents. In rural areas, the problem is even bigger as compared to the urban areas. In urban areas, children have resources and their parents are also educated so they can help their children in studies. In rural sectors where school is not only the place for learning but they also get nutritious food there in the form of mid-day meal, was closed during this time, so they faced difficulty not only in learning process but also malnutrition (Bahl et al. 2021).

This sudden shift has worsened the already existing educational disparities, as numerous students faced challenges accessing the required technology and reliable internet connections. In addition, the extended period of being alone and not having much opportunity for socialising has had a negative impact on the mental well-being of young people. The pandemic has emphasised the urgent need to address the simultaneous crises of educational disruption and mental health issues in order for India's youth to recover and thrive in the post-pandemic environment.

This paper investigates into the various ways in which COVID-19 has affected the education and health of children and youth in India. Through an analysis of the difficulties and

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outcomes experienced in this Covid time, we aim to comprehend the wider impact on India's path of progress and recommendation to minimize negative impact and promote resilience in these vital areas.

Objective of Study

- a) To assess psychological health of children and youth during COVID-19.
- b) To analyse overall positive and negative impact of COVID-19 on school going children and youth.

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on descriptive secondary data. Methodology adopted was systematic review of the literature gazing upon the study design, research strategy, quality of data and analysis of diversely reported data.

RESULTS

As per article, about 68.8 percent of students have faced fear of COVID situation. 28.8 percent reported moderate to severe depression and approximately 51.50 percent of students experienced mild to severe anxiety (Chaudhary et al. 2021). The article clearly depicts the psychological condition of students during the COVID-19 lockdown.

In COVID-19 situation when there is weak strength in primary schools, the mid-day meal scheme seems to be collapsed or is partially functional. In some areas in schools, food was served, in other areas, cash was distributed, in some areas food and cash both were distributed simultaneously as per government guidelines or students' convenience. The fund of the midday meal was a cash transfer (through Direct bank transfer) to the student account. The irregularity continues till full full-fledged reopening of school in 2022. As the report suggests before COVID-19, Indian schools were running mostly on a physical presence basis. COVID-19 led to a complete lockdown in the first phase as there was a lack of digital infrastructure in many rural and in urban schools too. The mobile internet reform was in an earlier stage as 4G had been recently launched and supply infrastructure was

still in progress. Hence availability of mobile phones and internet facilities lagged in rural/remote setups. 43 percent of rural children lacked digital material resources. This shows a huge digital infrastructure divide in rural-urban setups. From different reports, it is clear how COVID-19 has impacted the education scenario in India. As per reports, rural schools in India suffered a lot. The ratio of "children not studying at all" in rural to urban contexts remains thrice in number, while "children studying online regularly" in rural areas during COVID-19 reduced to 3x less as compared to urban areas (Bakhla et al. 2021). Report clearly shows that rural school students have been more impacted during the COVID-19 lockdown.

DISCUSSION

Psychological Effects on Children

Homestay in closed conditions as inflicted in the corona times had many negative consequences. Neuropsychiatric manifestations and psycho-social stigmas are among them. Young children face direct and lingering psycho-social bearing. They also have severe alterations in lifestyle, mental status and physical activity (Wang et al. 2020). Children trapped in educational institutions during quarantine suffered more as they did not have emotional support that others were getting in their homes, living with their parents. When it comes to children's proper health, it depends on proper parental association as much as on nutritional and medical care. If children are separated from their parents in such critical phase of life even for short durations, it can have long-lasting consequences, including anxiety, loneliness, stress disorder, depression, psychosis, delinquency and in worst cases even suicidal thoughts (Humphreys 2019; Liu et al. 2023; Loades et al. 2020; Patra and Patro 2020; Beckman et al. 2023). Authorities dealing with children in these tough times should keep some things in mind. First and foremost being that they should have adequate resources to connect them to their parents. The stress level of parents will also be high whose children are far from them in these challenging situations and this, in turn, will put these children more at risk of trauma (Hu et al. 2021; Ghosh et al. 2020).

Students face a lot of stress in their regular academic sessions due to various reasons in secondary and tertiary education settings (La Velle et al., 2020; Liu 2015). In these unprecedented times of social distancing and lockdown inflicted because of pandemic and the unprecedented escalation of academic stress was clearly visible in the student community (Brooks et al. 2020). Various research and reports confirmed that students' ability, mental health, academic performance and well-being was severely affected by the constant academic stress (Shah et al. 2020). Academics induced stress in turn is responsible in many ways in curtailing children's academic motivation (Kumar et al. 2020a; Liu et al. 2020). This leads them pregnable to dropping out of academic institutions, drug abuse, unemployment and exacerbate incidence of psychological disorders like anxiety and depression (Delvecchio et al. 2022; Lynch and Cicchetti 1997; Loades et al. 2020; Patra and Patro 2020; Pajek et al. 2023). Continued stress in children and adolescents is a leading cause of health problems such as obesity, metabolic syndrome and decreased insulin sensitivity it will in turn leads to curtailment of life expectancy (Shah et al. 2020).

Health and Nutrition Issues

Due to this mental healthcare, maternal healthcare, basic health care and supply of essential medicines were affected adversely (Mahapatra and Sharma 2021). Insulin supply was in shackles, which is important for children having type-1 diabetes. Same is the Case with anti-retroviral formulations important for HIV infected children (Pervanidou and Chrousos 2012). Children having respiratory tract diseases are facing shortage of inhalers are few examples of unavailability of primary health facilities (Pascoe et al. 2020). Children belonging to underprivileged communities usually depend on school for their primary health care. In these times of lockdown, they were deprived from primary health care putting them at risk of many diseases that are common in underprivileged children (Golberstein et al. 2020; Singh et al. 2020). In addition, the Mental and maternal care took a hit as primary health centres and anganwadi workers were burdened with COVID-19 testing, quarantine measures and later in vaccination

drive. COVID-19 disrupted the reproductive health and family planning care services (Hall et al. 2020).

The closure of government schools created one more problem, that is, food security and nutrition of children nationwide due to suspension of midday meal program that caters to almost all the children's nutritional needs coming to school. These children targeted by the midday meal program are mostly from disadvantages backgrounds having no other option for their dietary needs. Midday meal scheme started in 1995 for pilot study and later implemented across the country. In global shutdown school children in government school confront dual challenge of lack of education and nutrition (Alvi and Gupta 2020). Closure of school put a question mark on the food security of children which were totally dependent on the midday meals scheme provided by the school. The situation was even worse because parents of the children are mostly below poverty line, labourers or daily wagers. Malnutrition was evident if not hunger in these children because of lack of nutritious food as parents of these children could barely feed them with help of free ration distributed by the Indian government. Midday meals even though not tasty had nutrition values to some extent due to constant supervision and pressure from government machinery (Afridi 2011). Although state governments were trying their level best to provide grains and pulses even cooking oil to maintain the nutritional status of the children but still shortage of fruits and vegetables and tendency to save money was a big hurdle in nutritional security. Some states were providing direct money in the bank account and some were providing the grains etc. Both types of Schemes were not serving the purpose because of the above said reason of saving money.

Effect of COVID-19 on Education of Children

Positive Effects of COVID-19 on Education

There is always a silver lining in the clouds and the same is here in case of the education system. Although the education system is going through a huge turmoil, educational institutes in collaboration with the government and other technical service providers are doing their best to provide quality education and fill the

gap created by the closure of the educational institute (Beckman et al. 2023).

Digital Platform Engagement for Education

Education system of India ushered into a new era due to transformation. It shredded the old ways to some extent. Due to COVID-19 tech engagement increased in a lot of sectors. Educational sector also observed this transformation. Educational Institutes which were earlier neglecting the adoption of digital systems welcomed the technological involvement (Khlaif et al. 2021). It indirectly saved the environment, a lot of material got circulated in the form of soft copy. Hard copies would cost a lump sum of money as well as many trees would be cut down for the need for paper. Due to digital mode of learning, those parents who never indulge in technology now know how to digitally literate to take care of their children. The same is the case with the children, so digital literacy experiences upward movement. More collaborative study is now become a reality. Many teachers can join a single frame to teach. It also increases the exposure of students as they explore teaching material from abroad also.

Negative Impact of COVID-19 on Education

Break Off In Educational Activity

Education institutes closed and due to this situation physical classes could not take place. Examination got postponed and there was no timeline for revival of the classes and examinations. Almost all sessions of 2020-2021 were affected by the lockdown. In the beginning of session, it was completely shut down for 5-6 months and after that online education started (La Velle et al. 2020). Teaching- learning in its original way only started in latter half of 2021. This adversely impacts the continuity of education. This has further deteriorated, as resuming educational activity after such a gap puts more pressure on the children.

Unprepared Teachers/Students for Online Education

In Indian education system, there was not much focus on online learning because in our

country we have to devise such ways that they become level playing field for everybody. Sudden need of online education left teachers and students in a state of confusion as both of them were not prepared for this sudden challenge (Munastiwi and Puryono 2021). Had it been a smooth transition then we could have completed the lapses by training, seminars and other methods. Right now, it is not working very well and there is huge need for the resumption of proper offline class that gives the opportunity to interact face-to-face.

Digital Divide

Parallel to the economic divide, a digital divide was evident among the students. There were many students who cannot afford to have laptop or mobile in their home to continue their education. Many students do not have access to internet due to financial reasons. Lock down hit hard economically weaker sections. Students from these strata were not able to access online educational content as suggested by many reports. COVID-19 pandemic might accentuate the gap between urban-rural and rich-poor especially when it comes to teaching-learning (Jena 2020).

Connectivity Problems

There are connectivity problems in many areas in our country, especially in rural areas and areas with tough terrain like northeast and part of forest belt in central India like Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh etc. which also impacted the relief measures taken by the government to boost education system again.

CONCLUSION

We as a country have come a long way in dealing with this pandemic. We struggled a lot with rural school education infrastructure where the digital divide is clearly visible, children and youth faced psychological ailments and supportive schemes like mid-day meals almost collapsed during COVID-19. Many things have come to normalcy including education by the phased re-opening of the schools and colleges but still, we have to do a lot more for the time wasted and to fill the gaps shown due to this pandemic. By taking all the stakeholders into

account, we can drive our country's children and youth toward a safer and brighter future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study shows that rural has lagged in digital infrastructure so students in rural/remote locations suffered a lot during this pandemic. The recommendation of study is schools should be equipped with digital resources/technology so they can be operated in both the mode online and offline. Parents need to be trained to help their children with digital access to resources in emergency periods like lockdown so their children education should not be hampered.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no potential conflict of interest regarding the publication of this work.

AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

Amrita Dwivedi, Deepak Rathore and Ravikant Dubey have planned this work; Deepak Rathore and Ravikant Dubey have performed the extraction of database; analysis and presentation of data; Deepak Rathore and Ravikant Dubey wrote the manuscript draft; Amrita Dwivedi reviewed and edited the manuscript.

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