

Education in Lockdown: The Vulnerability of the Less Privileged

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The shocking headline of an article in the news in July reads as follows: “Himachal Man sells Cow to buy Smartphone for Kids’ Online Classes.” (India Today n.p.). This really spells out the challenges posed to the poor in adopting digital learning in our country: This is the reality of online education for the masses of our country who are not affluent enough to buy smartphones or laptops.

Even for people who can afford this technology, the transition from physical classes to virtual learning has been challenging and difficult. Problems of connectivity, health concerns like eye and back problems, the psychological upset of not being in a social situation with their friends—these are the odds the average middle-class student may have to face. The position of the less privileged is much worse. Through this paper, I would like to highlight the plight of the poor in adapting to online learning.

CURRENT SITUATION AND CHALLENGES

A study shows that only 24% students in India have access to the internet, and this percentage rises slightly in urban areas, with 42% of students having internet facilities in their house. In rural areas, this number is reduced to 15%. (Singhn.P.) The numbers clearly indicate that the poor and the marginalised have to struggle for education. In the current time of the pandemic, with the replacement of physical classes with online learning, this section of society has had to bear the brunt. Even in normal times, it is a challenge for those who are daily workers, or menials, to be able to send their children to school. For some parents, it is a more attractive bargain to have the child do some hard labour to bring in a few extra rupees to the household kitty.

Since the lockdown began in March, schools have begun to take online classes for their students. This has not been a seamless process. Teachers have been forced to learn technology—something a lot of them are unfamiliar with. Apart from the teachers’ own lack of technical know-how and low confidence in using their ICT tools, there is the larger problem of a large section of our country being deprived of an education simply because they are too poor to afford the equipment that is required for this online engagement. Their lack of digital devices, non-availability of internet connectivity and the absence of technical support has ensured that the lockdown has disrupted their right to get an education. A smooth transition has not been possible for them.

The pressure on the teachers is immense. They have to complete their syllabi, ensure adequate understanding of what is being taught to the students, and take care of the evaluation process as well. In this scenario, the teachers cannot possibly ensure that all the students have equal access to information. With less attention on them from the school, the students experience neglect. In the absence of a state-guided action plan which can hold the students to the system, there have been many dropouts from schools, either from lack of resources, or the inability of the parents to be able to pay the school fees. A large number of students also left their schools to return with their worker parents to their native villages.

Another issue that is important to highlight here is how women's work (which is anyway unpaid) in the household has increased by having to help children in not just home work but also school work. This is especially true of younger children who need constant supervision during online classes.

It is indeed sad that the pandemic has forced our country's education to be moved to the virtual platform. Despite all attempts by the government to advocate equality among all in education, and ensuring education for all children through the Right to Education Act, the high cost of virtual learning deprives the children of the poor from getting a comprehensive education. While most schools tried their best to make the best of all the online resources they had, the government schools which cater to lower income groups faced this time with a greater problem since their students did not have access to phones or laptops easily.

Additional expenses of the laptop, or a Smartphone and the recurring expense of an internet package are costs which an average family would not have had to factor into their monthly budget if regular mode of schooling was operational. Their life has been disrupted in many ways, the digital divide being the one that underscores their lack in the rudest of ways.

MEASURES TAKEN BY GOVERNMENT AND INDIVIDUALS

However bleak the situation sounds; there are several solutions that can be organised to improve the situation. The onus is on our government to bridge this gap. There must also be a concerted effort by private organisations and individuals in powerful positions to work towards making this situation more equitable.

One effective manner in which education can be digitally spread is by classes on Doordarshan. The NIOS already telecasts school lessons through the Doordarshan channel called GyanAmrit. This is an effective way to reach to the grassroots. The government should leverage this spread of Doordarshan in a more comprehensive manner. However, given the size and variation in language in our country, this is a huge task, and would require a lot of groundwork. Teachers will have to be trained and teaching modules conceived to suit the curriculum of the target audience. Syllabi and curriculum would have to be reworked to establish uniformity in teaching so as to be able to implement it effectively.

The government has made several efforts to improve the actual ground reality and has attempted to provide a balanced online education to all students. The ground breaking humanitarian steps taken by individual educators to deal with this situation are a source of inspiration and hope. There have been reports of how a few educators have thought of innovative methods to ensure that the poor are not shut out of education during the time of the pandemic. Some teachers in rural settings have gone from house to house providing learning tools and resources to the students. They have shared their phones to make students have access to digital material. A lot of schools in rural areas provide midday meals, which was the main attraction for a lot of students, so some schools have been delivering these meals to students in their homes so that the student remains motivated. A *Hindustan Times* report talks of how a school principal, Sanjeev Bagul, of Kalamshet village, has taken it upon himself to go to students' houses to oversee the progress of each child. This keeps the teachers motivated to work hard. Such initiatives will be able to make students sustain their interest in studies. The recent announcement by the finance minister of the "One Class, One Channel" initiative will also improve the situation.

In the current situation of lockdown, the other problem faced by educational institutions is also the availability of learning aids like books, notes and other material. Access to resources is definitely a prerogative of the rich. The disparity between the rich and poor has been adequately exposed in online teaching. All the social divides in the country have been reiterated in the scramble to achieve an efficient method of online engagement with students. The rich vs poor, urban vs rural, boy child vs girl child, subjects that one thought had been relegated to the social science textbooks now stare at us challengingly. Availability of online platforms is a luxury not many enjoy. While the students of private schools have been able to make this shift in a more orderly manner, rural schools, and government schools catering to the poorer populations.

The Delhi government has also made efforts to ensure that poor children also get rations to make up for the midday meal they were served in the school. Aneesha Bedi quotes the NDMC commissioner Varsha Joshi saying "Teachers present at food distribution centres to give dry rations are calling up parents and asking them to collect worksheets too when they come to collect food." (Bedin.P.)

It is not only technology, but other factors also that hamper the smooth education of disadvantaged children. Even if they manage to have the necessary digital devices to attend class, there can be other constraints such as cramped living quarters, which cannot ensure an uninterrupted attention to the class. In the present situation, a lot of children have to actively contribute to household work, especially the girls. This also prevents them from devoting time to their school classes, which happen according to a fixed timetable. The digital device being used may be a shared one, which two or more children may have to take turns sharing.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Puja Pednekar, in her article entitled *Can Online Learning Replace the School Classroom*, “proposes opening schools in shifts or in 50% capacity which might be a better way for a developing country like ours and especially true for government schools and students who cannot afford smart devices for elearning.” (Pednekar n.p.)

Traditionally disadvantaged students have now got access to many new avenues through the availability of cheap smartphones. So, the gap between the rich and poor has reduced to some extent. Compared to laptops, the mobile phones have a deeper reach into the lower classes, and the government could possibly leverage the comparatively easier access the poor students have to mobile phones to provide education. Radio is also a medium which can be explored. The radio has always enjoyed a wider reach than the television in the rural areas. It is possible to launch a massive ground level educational plan in order to reach the largest number of students especially among the lower strata.

The large scale loss of livelihood among these people also makes education of their children a low priority. Given that they may not have access to even cheaper electronic equipment like radios and televisions, the government should organise mass missions to distribute basic educational material. Under the Right to Education Act, all children are entitled to education, but to ensure that parents find this option viable, many incentives need to be given to these students so that they are sent to school by parents. Midday meals, free stationery and other material needs to be distributed to maintain the interest of these students. To ensure all children get equal access to virtual education, the government has to work towards supplementing online learning with other aids, like written material and CDs which will add value to the students’ learning.

Constant efforts are being made by the government to make it possible for poor children and children from backward areas to be able to study on the online mode. Whether it is training teachers to adapt to taking classes online, providing a variety of study material to aid and support online learning or providing hardware to students, the government has made continuous efforts. However, given the scope of the education services of our country, this is a very difficult task. In an attempt to make this task achievable, the central government has launched the e-Vidya platform to provide television transmission of school classes so that it can reach all sections of society.

Our constitution gives equal rights to all citizens, including the Right to Education. Yet, the pandemic has made us so dependent on electronic equipment that the costs are prohibitive for the poor. Through government school initiatives, we must attempt to make this huge gap smaller. Even though it may take a long time, it is important that the government should address this issue of social inequality which has become even more obvious in the time of online learning. This pandemic should be learning for all stakeholders—the school, the administration, the government and the parents and students—to be prepared for such situations in the future

where normal life is disrupted. Despite all possible efforts, it is not possible to include each student in the net of the virtual classroom. The large number of students who come from extremely poor families, faced with hunger, poverty and other issues, cannot be catered to by a system that needs an investment of money and technology to get access to education. The major player in this scenario should be the government, which should ensure that measures are taken to provide education to every strata of society.

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