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Challenges and opportunities for Indian education system amid the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

The unexpected spread of the COVID-19 epidemic has given rise to a unique circumstance and established a new standard of living all across the planet. India announced the temporary lockdown in March of 2020, and it has been followed by a succession of laws over a few months. During this time, education is one of the essential fields that have been severely hampered by the setbacks that have occurred. The academic community, on the other hand, began to address the issue and find viable alternatives to the existing solutions by predicting future issues. The educational institutions have begun the process of establishing curricula to reach students in rural and urban locations with the greatest number of possible opportunities. Modern Information technology was the only way to communicate with people during the COVID time; thus, we started using online education as a replacement for the traditional educational system. These advancements and new pedagogical approaches brought about a beneficial new transition into the education system. On the other hand, it has produced a graded hierarchy among the learning beneficiaries. Because of this, only a select few members of the affordable rich classes and a portion of the middle classes were able to access the online schooling education platform for themselves. In this paper, some of the digital initiatives are discussed that the Government of India has launched to make the education system in the nation more smooth. Both the good and bad effects that COVID-19 has had on education are explored, and some useful recommendations for carrying out educational activities during the pandemic crisis are also pointed out.

Keywords: Challenges, opportunities, Indian education system, COVID-19

Introduction

The world has experienced several pandemics throughout the course of its history. However, the current COVID-19 pandemic emergency has shocked the whole world by having an effect on health and development. Despite the fact that today's globalised world is more linked than ever before, the epidemic touched practically every country without regard to gender, economy, ethnicity, whether they were wealthy or poor, or any other differences. During the course of the epidemic, education has been one of the industries that have been hit the worst. In March 2020, a lockdown was implemented throughout the whole of India for an initial period of 21 days. Subsequently, the duration of the lockdown was increased to months. During this time, children did not attend traditional schools since they were not in session. All of the stakeholders involved in education, including the students, the instructors, and the administrators, were unsure of the next steps to take. The protracted prolongation of the lockdown time, on the other hand, has rendered the only choice available to be the search for an alternate educational system. As a direct consequence of this, a significant number of India's low-cost educational institutions have begun to implement large amounts of e-learning technologies. The emergence of COVID-19 has also shown us the need to adapt to change. It has acted as a spur for educational institutions to develop and choose platforms with technologies that have not been employed in the past, which demonstrates its effectiveness as a catalyst. It has become a key landmark in the progression of the educational system in India's growth as a whole.

However, the impact that the pandemic had on its victims was not uniform across the board since it varied depending on their socioeconomic status. Students who came from privileged families were in a position to locate an alternative learning mechanism in the form of an online education platform.

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On the other hand, children who came from poor and underprivileged classes were unable to take advantage of these opportunities as a result of their lack of financial resources. The pandemic has made their life far more difficult by having a variety of different repercussions. The pandemic crisis has also brought to substantial light shortcomings in the government's efforts to facilitate the education of children by providing an alternative platform in terms of access, infrastructure, the reach of the internet to rural places, supporting personnel, and a positive atmosphere in order to combat the unanticipated natural disaster that has struck the nation. The present pandemic crisis with COVID19 has established a distinct dividing line between the rich classes and the disadvantaged classes. Nevertheless, this novel phenomenon was also responsible for the lives and opportunities of many disadvantaged groups, whilst many people are neither aware of the change that is taking place nor able to purchase it.

Education amid COVID-19

The pandemic scenario in the nation has had a negative impact on a variety of industries, including education, as well as trade, commerce, tourism, and health. The education industry is one of a kind since all other industries are interconnected in some way, either directly or indirectly. According to a study published by UNESCO in the year 2020, school cancellations had an impact on more than 320 million kids. Every industry has begun to implement the new standard, which is comprised of innovative practices that were initially implemented only by a small number of educational institutions. These practices gradually drew the attention of other educational institutions and paved the way for new kinds of approaches to teaching and learning, particularly at the secondary and higher education levels. In reaction to the new pedagogical methods, many educators and educationists thought that having technology assistance (e-Learning) for teaching and learning was the primary solution for the lockdown scenario. Nevertheless, the e-learning process is only available to 37.5 million students out of a total population of 320 million students worldwide. According to the UNESCO report (2020), primary and secondary level of education are most affected through pandemic in India. There are around 14 crores of students who are affected at the elementary level, while 13 crores of students are affected at the secondary level.

A limited number of online programmes and courses, such as MOOCs and Swayam, have been successfully implemented by the government. According to the findings of the National Sample Survey (NSSO) conducted in 2017-18, the Internet connection is only available in 23.8 percent of Indian homes. However, this number rises to between 14.9 and 42 percent in rural areas. There is also a gender component to using the Internet, as 36 percent of the male population has access to Mobile Internet data; however, only 16 percent of women are using mobile and internet data. This demonstrates that there is a significant gender gap in the use of the Internet. There is a cap of 12.5 percent on the percentage of students who have access to a smartphone. It is also apparent that the majority of parents need the financial means to purchase a smartphone for their children due to the current economic climate. Due to the circumstances, this digital gap is a severe challenge in the Indian education system. Only a few courses will profit

from this procedure, and a broad group of people will not be able to participate in the e-learning process because of this. The COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on higher education as well. As a result of the COVID scenario, the majority of educational institutions were forced to close their campuses, and the students and research researchers were required to return to their homes. Even in this context, the students and research scientists had to deal with uncertainties over their curriculum and the way they were being taught. The majority of academics, particularly those who teach at public or centrally sponsored educational institutions or universities, which are often the only option for underprivileged, high-achieving students from low-income families, have been forced to confront the problem of limited access to information in the form of scholarly books and journals. Webinars have taken the role of seminars. Many educational institutions are moving their tests, interviews, thesis submissions, and viva voices to the digital space. The comprehensive approach to education that it has taken in the past has been modified as a result of all these revolutionary advances. However, the only people who will gain from all of these improvements are the part of the courses. Even after enduring eight decades of its self-rule, the world's biggest democracy is still even. Despite this, the country's educational system is in a state of disrepair. Even in this day and age, none of the educational institutions in India can be found among the top 200 universities or colleges anywhere in the world. This pandemic condition has further limited the capabilities of educational institutions, particularly the institutions that are governed by the public sector. Here is where the role of government comes into play since it is their responsibility to establish the required arrangements and encourage traditional education while taking essential safety precautions.

Digital Education Initiatives taken by the Ministry of Education (MoE), India

A digital project has been launched by the Ministry of Education to solve the difficulties that are connected with distance education. All of these programmes are designed to meet the educational requirements of students at all levels, from elementary school to postgraduate study. In May, 2020, it was announced that a complete E-Initiative named PM eVidya will be launched to unite all of the efforts made by the electronic education platform. The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) estimates that around 25 crore students would benefit from these efforts. The following is a list of digital initiatives that are available to different parts of the student community, along with the principal goal of each initiative:

1. **National Repository of Open Educational Resources (NROER):** It is a digital library of resources that are available for use by educators in the context of the teaching and learning process. NROER provides educators with a stage on which they may produce material that is specific to their students' communities and is tailored to meet their requirements. NROER provides resources for all curricular areas and grade levels, as well as a variety of language options. The materials may be accessed in a variety of formats, including concept maps, videos, audio clips, talking books, multimedia, learning objects, pictures, infographics, charts, articles, and wiki pages. Textbooks

are also accessible. The repository's media materials are arranged in categories that correspond to the themes they cover. The contents are organised into the following five categories: Mathematics, Science, Social Science, languages and Art Education.

2. **Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing (DIKSHA):** It is an initiative of NCERT, which was carried out under the purview of the Ministry of Education. DIKSHA is a national learning platform for school education. Learners and educators from all throughout the country may use it. Now supports 36 Indian languages and is available nationwide. The policies and tools provided by DIKSHA make it possible for the education ecosystem (instructors, educationists, experts, organisations, government institutions, autonomous institutions, non-govt and private organisations) to participate, contribute to, and leverage a common platform in order to accomplish learning goals at scale for the country. DIKSHA has been designated as "One Nation, One Digital Platform" as part of the Government of India's PM e-Vidya programme, which was announced as being a component of the Atma Nirbhar Bharat.
3. **Operation Digital Board:** It is an initiative that was started by the Minister of Education with the goal of using technology to improve the standard of education across the nation. ODB will assist teachers in the delivery of personalized adaptive learning and intelligent tutoring through the utilization of up-and-coming technologies such as machine learning, artificial intelligence, and data analytics. In addition to making e-resources accessible to students whenever they need them and wherever they may be located, ODB will also assist in the delivery of personalized adaptive learning and intelligent tutoring via the use of up-and-coming technologies such as machine learning, artificial intelligence, and data analytics. This will allow ODB to realize its goal of transforming a traditional classroom into a digital classroom.
4. **Online MOOC Courses:** SWAYAM, which is one of the world's biggest Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), is an integrated platform of free online courses that cover subjects from high school onwards until higher education, including skill-based courses to ensure that each student benefits from the learning material through information and communication technology (ICT). The use of audio-video and multimedia content, as well as cutting-edge pedagogy and technology, has been included in these courses to improve the quality of the educational experience.
5. **On AIR-Shiksha Vani:** The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) has a podcast called Shiksha Vani that distributes audio information for numerous topics from grades 9 to 12. The Shiksha Vani app may be downloaded through the Play Store. Shiksha Vani has roughly 400 individual pieces of content, all of which are in the form of audio files and correspond to subjects covered in the NCERT curriculum.
6. **Digital Accessible Information System (DAISY):** It is a technological platform for digitised text, magazines, and digital audiobooks. People who are unable to read printed content due to a "vision disability," such as blindness, poor vision, or dyslexia, are the intended

users of the DAISY format. This format is meant to provide a comprehensive audio alternative for printed material. The DAISY format is an advanced audio book format that is built on top of the MP3 and XML file formats. DAISY multimedia may take the form of a book, magazine, newspaper, journal, computer-generated text, or a display of text and audio that is synced with one another.

7. **e-PathShala:** The Digital India initiative has encouraged a significant increase in the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the teaching and learning process. An initiative taken on jointly by the Ministry of Education and NCERT, the e-PathShala was developed for the purpose of showcasing and disseminating all educational e-resources, such as textbooks, audio, video, periodicals, and a wide variety of other print and non-print materials, to Students, Teachers, Parents, researchers, and educators. It provides access to digital textbooks for all courses, as well as other learning resources and grading systems, and it permits participation in a variety of events such as workshops, festivals, competitions, and exhibitions.
8. **Swayam Prabha:** It is a programme of the Ministry of Human Resources Development that aims to deliver 34 High-Quality Educational Channels through DTH (Direct to Home) in every region of the nation, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, using the GSAT-15 satellite. It provides curriculum-based course material that covers many different fields of study. This is mainly focused on bringing high-quality educational materials to geographically isolated locations where access to the internet is still something of a problem. The programs on the channel come from organisations like NPTEL, IITs, UGC, CEC, IGNOU, NCERT, and NIOS, BISAG in Gandhinagar.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic scenario is the most challenging and excruciating catastrophe of the decade, and it has resulted in a significant loss for the economy of the whole nation. It has had a multiplier impact on the business world, as well as the financial industry, the healthcare industry, and the educational system. As a direct consequence of this, the country was in the midst of an economic crisis, and many people have lost their jobs and other sources of income as a direct result of the pandemic-related government shutdown. In this setting, the function that public spending plays in the welfare of individuals is of the utmost importance. In addition, the Ministry of Education (MoE) has to abandon its policies that encourage commercialization and work to lower entrance costs, tuition fees, fees for using the hostel's mess hall, and any other expenses. It is the responsibility of the public education system to provide assistance to less privileged groups in order to increase their chances of being accepted into the traditional educational system. The period of lockdown resulted in a worsening of the situation for teachers in terms of receiving their regular salaries and other emoluments, and it is very important for the government to look into the problems faced by teachers. It is a tragedy that public schools are being compelled to close one by one, and it is one of the most pitiful circumstances for democracy with the greatest population in the world. Therefore, the current expenditure of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on

education by the government should be increased from 3.3 percent.

The process of teaching and learning is shown to benefit from new technology upgrades identified by educational institutions. As a direct consequence of this, most educational activities are now carried out online. In the pandemic, there has been a significant increase in the number of people using online learning software, video conferencing tools, language learning applications, and virtual tutoring services, according to the World Economic Forum. Even in India, there is a significant increase in the use of online education. The use of online platforms such as Zoom, WhatsApp, and Skype for classes is rapidly becoming the industry standard for students, parents, and educators. Nevertheless, this jarring shift to online learning does not come close to making up for the loss of classroom time. Still, the digital infrastructure in India is not yet developed enough to allow education to spread to all regions of the country. The current selection of digital platforms will result in disadvantages for those pupils who do not have the same advantages as their peers. The digital gap has been streamlined by the government. Government of India is taking steps towards it by facilitating and providing the required technologies. The digital initiatives launched by the government of India is a great step towards it.

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