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Continuing Education in Time of COVID-19: The Way Ahead

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Context & Scope of the Study

India has one of the largest populations of K-12 students in the world. India has 15 lakh schools; 72% are Government schools while the remaining 28% are Government-aided or private schools (2015-2016)[i]. The Covid-19 pandemic has left about 320 million students in India out of school, with uncertainty of the future of their formal school education.

With learning levels and access to education already at a dismal level, the government recommended that institutions take a step towards online education. A few infrastructural issues that have become pertinent now include access to digital resources for both students and teachers, teacher training to make online learning effective for students, and the required preparedness to conduct examinations remotely. While online teaching has been adopted by numerous schools in tier-1 and tier-2c cities as the current solution, the rural masses (~66% of the population) are facing the brunt of the digital divide.

Electricity supply is the primary requirement for any household to go ahead with digital learning, and herein lies the first problem. Mission Antyodaya, a nationwide survey conducted in 2017-18 by the Ministry of Rural Development showed that 16% rural households receive 1-8 hours of electricity, 33% 9-12 hours and only 47% receive electricity for more than 12 hours a day. The National Sample Survey 2018 stated that only 24% Indian households have an internet facility, and only about 20% of Indians above the age of 5 could use the internet.

Executive Summary

India is one of the countries severely hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the adverse effects are exacerbated by the already appalling state of education in the country.

With one of the largest populations of K-12 students in the world, the Indian government has recommended that institutions initiate online learning for students. For this to happen effectively, the India government and policymakers need to address concerns around the increasing digital divide, the larger impact of the pandemic on vulnerable groups, negative impact on children's mental and physical health, and improving the entire learning process.

While GoI's initiatives aim to create a rich digital repository of learning resources, policymakers need to ensure these are being accessed and effectively utilised by the ones who need them.

Recommendations
The key policy recommendations in a scenario such as this include both short term and long-term action plans.

- ➔ In the short term, action plans designed based on the combination of a region's susceptibility to the virus and its digital preparedness are recommended to each region.
- ➔ In the long term, higher emphasis on mental health awareness, safety of children, incentives for higher enrolment, and bridging the learning gap would benefit all stakeholders.

The transition from classroom teaching to digital channels means a shift towards more student-centric teaching methods. This has also brought out the long-term issue of training educators on new technology and platforms. Most teachers have been found to be inept at teaching online or creating teaching resources such as presentations, audios or videos that are ideally needed to conduct online classes effectively. Most pedagogical innovations cater to educators in urban India, with the rural masses being placed at a major disadvantage.

Another aspect highlighted in the current scenario is of the infrastructure and framework required to conduct examinations - HSC and SSC finals, UG and PG final year examinations have been cancelled by the several state authorities, causing further uncertainty for the students.

India's inequality in education is predicted to increase due to the pandemic. Vulnerable groups like the economically disadvantaged, girls and children with disabilities are disproportionately impacted by the long-term impacts of gaps in education due to the lockdown. 69% of our PWD population live in rural areas and cannot afford smartphones or internet access[ii]. Additionally, disabilities have not been considered in

guidelines issued for disseminating education online.

A report by the Malala Fund, finds that the Ebola crisis led to a tripling of the female dropout rate in Liberia[iii]. A similar trend is expected for developing countries, where girls will drop out due to economic stress on households. Shortage in spending of the Government on education due to the economic downturn is likely to lower focus on sanitation and other incentives to keep girls in school. Finally, the economic stress on migrant workers and the poor are likely to lead to reduced expenditure on children's education in the future. The ASER survey 2018 revealed that children with lower learning levels are less likely to have a computer literate family member[iv].

The lockdown, having increased the responsibility for education on parents, will lead to a gap in education for families with low literacy. A research team at NWEA in the USA estimates that students returning to school after the lockdown will have a further 30% decline in reading levels and could fall one year behind in math[4]. A Brookings study puts an economic value to this gap, at a loss of $1337 per year in wages. Hence, for India, the gap in learning outcomes for children is likely to widen dramatically.

Further, schools have been more than learning centres for children. They provide children with nutrition, social protection, emotional and health support, especially the ones from poor families. In fact, due to the closure of schools about 9.12 crore children are not receiving their mid-day meals. Naturally the burden of this comes on to the parents (financially disadvantaged) who already spend 75% of their income on meals[v].This might compromise the safety of children and may result in increased child abuse, child marriages, child labour and child trafficking.

The safety of not only children, but also teachers is of concern here as they work as contractual workers at relief distribution centres for a source of income. There are over 6 lakh teachers who are more than 55 years old and thus are more vulnerable to the virus. They can act as the carriers of the virus as well.[vi]

In terms of health, frequent sanitizing of hands is recommended as a precautionary measure, but 45% of schools do not have the required facilities. Furthermore, teams responsible for handling hygiene activities are severely understaffed with only 1 staff member for every 312 students[6].

Emotional well-being of the students is equally important. Teachers have an added responsibility of providing psycho-social support. But, in India 19% of teachers are not professionally qualified for the job and even among the rest, only a few are trained in providing mental health support. There will be a need for emotional rehabilitation as schools start to reopen. Looking at these dimensions of health and safety amidst the pandemic is extremely important since it has long term effect.

Research and Analysis Section

The Indian Government has launched and promoted several platforms to enable e-learning - the popular ones being DIKSHA, SWAYAM, E-Paathshala and SWAYAMPRABHA[vii]. While DIKSHA focuses on providing training resources to teachers, SWAYAM and E-Paathshala provide resources like PDFs of textbooks and virtual courses to students. SWAYAMPRABHA provides 24×7 educational programmes through 32 DTH channels and Youtube videos. With over 3 crore views, the Youtube channel has 56K total videos covering school and higher education. Sierra Leone had resorted to spreading education through TV during Ebola and Bangladesh recently followed suit[viii]. India is moving in a similar direction with SWAYAMPRABHA that will have one channel for each grade.

Recognizing a need to adapt to the new normal post lockdown, UNESCO has provided guidelines for the reopening of schools[ix]. Prior to reopening, it recommends facilitating remote access, raising funds to provide economic incentives for female enrolment and planning to ensure safe operations. On reopening, sanitation and hygiene should be prioritized while pedagogy should be the long-term focus to allow for remote learning. Some European countries have reopened schools in shifts while others are waiting till September[x]. The risk of the virus affecting children is low, however their role as carriers can not be underestimated.

Let's look at the initiatives that are being taken/proposed to reduce the impact of the virus on the children. The first mode of infection is through the virus itself. Although school children seem to be more resistant to the virus (half as likely to catch the virus as compared to adults[xi])

we must take necessary elaborate sanitizing measures like schools in China[xii].

We must sensitize children on the importance of social- distancing, sanitizing frequently, using their elbows while sneezing, etc. Staggered entry and exit to school, cancelling group sports & assembly activities, operating school in shifts, etc are a few alternatives. The caveat here is that the infrastructure in rural schools is not equipped to have such elaborate procedures. There are instances where families have had to take loans just to buy food-grains, leaving sanitizers as their last priority[xiii]. Therefore, there should be constant checks by teachers and parents for any symptoms of illness.

Children are even more vulnerable to psychosocial impacts due to isolation, anxiety, overt internet exposure and other psychosomatic effects[xiv]. Parents are the main point of contact and have a major role to play. Children need to be informed and engaged in various indoor activities. There should be constant learning happening so that it doesn't affect a child's growth adversely. Internet exposure should be monitored by parents so that the child doesn't fall prey to cyberbullying, insensitive content, etc. Extensive use of radio, TV and mobile phone to engage children with stories, songs, etc. would be helpful. A lot of NGOs in association with companies are trying to use different channels to reach the largest possible audience such as use of toll-free numbers, radio, and national/regional television[xv]. Teachers should encourage students to speak up about how they feel; they should make the students aware of the ongoing situation to facilitate "emotional rehabilitation".

There will be long-term effects on children due to this pandemic. To prevent cases of child marriage, abuse, and trafficking, frequent visits from digital volunteers and NGOs could be made possible. Constant monitoring might dissuade such activities as well. Along with this, frequent sensitization around the virus and any updates should be shared with the relevant stakeholders.

Exposition on the Current State/Central Policy(ies)

While initiatives such as DIKSHA, SWAYAM and National Digital Library (NDL) are aimed at creating and disseminating a rich repository of digital content through an app, the government still needs to consider the ability of the rural population to purchase stationery, internet recharges or digital devices to access these services. With households having little or no food resources, the internet becomes less of a priority. Sharing such resources is a far-off thought considering the small sizes of houses and strict social distancing required due to the pandemic.

The sudden lockdown has also caused several students to drop out of the education system and take up odd jobs to support their family's financial condition. In this scenario, airing educational content on TV or radio would be highly beneficial for the rural strata considering the 63% and 99% penetration of these media respectively.

Another aid for populations with high Covid cases and extremely low access to digital resources would be E-learning centres or camps. The camp model was tested out in different versions by a J-PAL-affiliated research team led by Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo in the states of Bihar, UP and Haryana. It turns out to be a more adaptable system considering the current system of social distancing where the duration, frequency and student strength of camps can be decided subject to an area's existing pandemic conditions. Grouping students based on their learning levels instead of class for homogeneity in abilities and organising e-learning sessions would pose a semblance of normalcy for these students.

The spending on education amidst this crisis has been kept in category C (budget restricted to within 15% of FY '21 estimate) and this is a definite cause for concern. There is still a lot of deliberation going on, regarding reopening of schools, with the relevant stakeholders but no framework is in place[xvi]. The only guidelines that have been released yet, under the initiative called "Manodarpan", state how parents should take care of a child's mental health. Authorities are still assessing the possibility of staggered reopening of school along with new seating arrangements, running schools in shifts, social-distancing norms for safe on-boarding of students[xvii] .

Policy Recommendations

The policies for education can be categorised into both short term and long term.

In the short term, an action plan based on the combination of a region's susceptibility to the

virus and its digital preparedness is recommended to cater to each region's needs.

Digital Readiness: A Red-Green (Low-High) system to identify the digital preparedness of a school, based on its infrastructure to educate virtually and ensure safety of students on reopening.

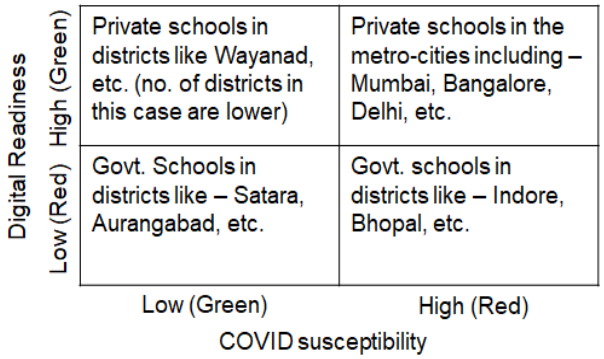
RED (Low):

1. Low digital infrastructure to conduct classes virtually.
2. Majority of students have little or no access to the internet.
3. Teachers may not possess adequate digital skills to engage in remote teaching.

GREEN (High):

1. Sufficient digital infrastructure to teach virtually (technical knowledge of video conferencing apps and other technologies)
2. Majority of students have access to the internet.
3. Teachers that can be trained to adapt to virtual teaching.

COVID-19 Susceptibility: The Government is using a localized strategy to ease lockdown restrictions. Hence, we could use the official recognition system of red and green zones, to identify regions. The matrix is just a representation of the same (the examples are not exhaustive)



The following steps can be taken for schools falling in respective zones.

Digital Readiness: **RED**
Covid Susceptibility: **RED**
Action Recommended:

1. Educate through DTH channels and radio: Expansion of SWAYAMPRABHA, especially in regional languages.
2. Equip parents to check on their children's progress after learning from these channels.
3. Free IVMR service for children to call, learn, listen to short stories, and engage.
4. Spread information regarding these modes of education through PM speeches, news, local government bodies.
5. Take help of digital volunteers and NGOs to spread information and engage children.

Digital Readiness: **RED**
Covid Susceptibility: **GREEN**
Action Recommended:

1. Open schools in shifts, calling fewer children each day.
2. Allow entry, exits, and breaks in slots and space out seating.
3. Make masks mandatory.

Digital Readiness: **GREEN**
Covid Susceptibility: **RED**
Action Recommended:

1. Teach virtually through Zoom, etc.
2. Reduce screen time by giving breaks and assignments.
3. Hold meetings with parents to equip them with ways to teach at home.
4. Mandate sessions on discussing mental health with children.

Digital Readiness: **GREEN**
Covid Susceptibility: **GREEN**
Action Recommended:

1. Open schools with enough precautions.
2. Rework pedagogy to allow for a mix of physical and virtual classes.

For the long term, the following can be looked at:

1. **Mental Health Awareness:** Through the Manodarpan initiative, mental health advisories should be publicized. Clinically approved methods to substitute the lack of physical activity of children should be researched and promoted.
2. **Incentives for Enrolment:** To prevent dropouts, economic incentives should be given to EWS and female students. Mid-Day meal scheme and other subsidies for examination fees and books should be provided.

3. **Safety of Children:** Sanitation and hygiene of schools should be prioritized through enough funding and training.
4. **Digital Preparedness:** Schools should invest in building digital infrastructure to allow classes and examinations to be conducted online. This is possible by strengthening DIKSHA and E-Paathshala.
5. **Bridging the Learning Gap:** Syllabus and pedagogy should be changed to support students in catching up when schools reopen. Remedial facilities should be provided to students from EWS who would have faced a large gap in education due to low access to the internet.

A balanced approach that weighs the opportunity cost of the education gap needs to be taken in designing policies. The pandemic is not likely to settle soon, hence long-term preparedness needs to be emphasised in tandem with dealing with the current crisis.

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