



Online Education : A Big Challenge for our Society

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Abstract: *The emergence and spread of COVID-19, has challenged the education system across the world and forced educators to shift to an online mode of teaching overnight. In India too, the government has been encouraging online education to achieve academic continuity. Since then online education has trickled down to schools and colleges. The challenges of online education in India, are multifaceted. It is matter of utmost concern for us, to understand Online education in India, for Indian society. Indian society suffers from a huge socio-economic divide. Educational Institution are struggling to find options to deal with this challenging situation. It is time to analyse the importance of online learning and Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, & Challenges of e-learning modes in the time of crisis.*

Education is a backbone of any country. It is very heart breaking to see the whole education system been disrupted during this pandemic. Education is in crisis, at the moment. Today, our education system has gone through a paradigm shift not just in terms of resources and content, but also in terms of mode. E-books replaced the hardcovers, Google Classrooms replaced project files, tablet screens replaced whiteboards, and classroom interaction replaced by virtual meetings. The whole education system has been suddenly shifted digitally which is a huge challenge for both the students and teachers to cope up with.

More than 30% of the country's population is not computer literate. Some of them even don't know how to start a computer. It is estimated that only about 25 per cent of Indian households have an internet facility. For rural households, that number drops to 15 per cent. The worst affected, as always, will be the marginalised, rural and poor populations. Everyone can not afford a computer or a laptop. Some sections of the society such as farmers, maids, housecleaners, sweepers and waiters may face difficulties purchasing a laptop. The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed structural imbalances between rural and urban, male and female, rich and

poor, even in the digital world. Students are facing lots of practical problems, especially less fortunate students who don't have devices or Internet connections are struggling to get themselves educated until this pandemic ends. Students in big cities and metro cities can avail the internet facilities and can easily access the online classes, but students staying in villages or small towns are still struggling for proper education during this pandemic. Most of the rural Indian households have no access to the internet and live streaming facilities. In the absence of well-equipped digital facilities students are struggling to understand the lessons. With the existing digital divide, expanding online education will push the digital have-nots to the periphery of the education system, thereby increasing inequity in educational outcomes.

The ongoing experiments on the digital education system are creating new challenges every moment. Along with the trend of online education and e-learning, come these very practical physically exhausting and mentally disturbing problems. Moving online for studies has radically affected the present mindset of both teachers and students. There are serious issues related to access, devices, content curation, teachers, training, testing, exams, grades, funding, facilities, salaries, parents and fees. Digital education is about appropriate platforms, technology, tools, interactivity, content curation and a lot more. We are completely underprepared. Government schools

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and colleges do not have the resources to provide digital education. Private schools and colleges are no different.

There are many challenges for the parents too. Who will assure uninterrupted broadband connectivity for several hours a day? Who will pay for the data? Is there adequate space and peace at home for students to concentrate? What happens when the power goes out? How to train kids at home to follow digital discipline? These are huge problems for working parents and poor people in slums and rural areas. The major challenge of remote learning is disparity in access - from electricity and internet connections, to devices like computer or smartphones. While a computer would be preferable for online classes, a smartphone could also serve the purpose. However, the phone might be convenient for apps, but not for carrying out lengthy assignments or research. According to the National Sample Survey report 2017-18 on education, only 24% of Indian households have an internet facility. While 66% of India's population lives in villages, only a little over 15% of rural households have access to internet services. For urban households, the proportion is 42%. In fact, only 8% of all households with members aged between five and 24 have both a computer and an internet connection. Among the poorest 20% households, only 2.7% have access to a computer and 8.9% to internet facilities. In case of the top 20% households, the proportions are 27.6% and 50.5%.

The gender divide in internet usage is also stark. As per the Internet and Mobile Association of India report, in 2019, while 67% men had access to internet, this figure was only at 33% for women. The disparity is more prominent in rural India, where the figures are 72% and 28% for men and women, respectively. If the governments continue online education without necessary supportive measures, the prevailing disparity in the virtual world could translate into widening educational inequalities among learners.

Apart from access, digital education also requires regular and predictable internet connectivity. The internet connectivity is not good everywhere. There are some cities of India where the people are still using 2G or 3G internet connection. A report by Quacquarelli Symonds on usage of internet in India reveals that both the state and the private players have not yet accomplished assured connectivity to all subscribers. The survey shows that among respondents who use home broadband, over 3% face cable cuts, 53% face poor connectivity and 32% face signal issues. In case of mobile data, 40.2% face poor connectivity and 56.6% face signal issues. The report pointed out connectivity and signal issues as the most prevailing problems faced by students while attending online classes. Learning demands a conducive environment for study. However, not all students have a quiet space for learning at home. While 37% of households in India have one dwelling room, it would be a luxury for many to attend

lectures in an undisturbed environment. Having online classes on a regular basis has a cost implication too, as students have to bear the cost of internet services. In the current situation, many students, especially those whose families have lost income as a result of a lockdown-related job loss, will not be able to afford this.

According to National institute of mental health and neurosciences the increased dependency on digital gadgets among children and adults during the lockdown period has also its side effects like eye strains, headache and computer vision syndrome. Parents are also concerned about too much overall screen time (mobile, television, gaming, laptop) including education now. Students tend to lose their interest in online learning and it's very challenging for the engagement of students or whole class together. Children attending prolonged virtual classes hardly concentrate and get bored very quickly. Technical problems such as internet connectivity and technical difficulties also disrupt their attention span. A good concentration and self-motivation are required for online education. Students below the age of 17 years may lack these skills. Student engagement plays a vital role in understanding the concept and makes teaching effective.

Due to the excessive availability of devices for online classes, students spend most of their time on the internet. Children hardly participate in extracurricular activities, whether it may be any



sport or music. Hence, they are least physically active these days, which might affect their mental as well as physical health. Also, since they are not able to interact with other students, their communication skills are affected.

The online education system is more of a type of screen-based learning system which restricts the students to perform practicals. There are a limited number of resources available to conduct an online examination in India. Besides this, there is a limitation for the number of questions that can be asked in the exam. Certain type of subjects and courses such as science and performing arts can not be taught in the digital education space. Children studying regional languages are at a disadvantage as there is not much standardised content available yet online for them. Teachers are also facing many challenges. Many of them are not technology savvy, digitally inept, a large number of teachers have never used an online environment to teach. Technical transformation is not possible overnight. Teaching a course online ideally requires preparation, such as designing a lesson plan and preparing teaching materials such as audio and video contents. This has posed new challenges for many teachers. They are not well trained for online education classes. They are forced to teach without resources and with limited required resources on their smartphones. Some teachers are not familiar with the new format of education. Besides this, it is not necessary that a good classroom

teacher will be a good teacher in the online classroom.

Without knowing the students' psychology, behaviour and no physical interaction they grapple to accomplish their duties. It is also difficult for them to conduct online exams and correct the examination sheet of each and every student on mail.

The biggest challenge for a teacher is to keep an eye on every student during online sessions as it is hard to check every student on a small screen of a phone. Also, it is difficult to avoid their distractions from mobile phones specifically during the session time.

Moreover, teachers are watched and judged for every little movement including their knowledge, grammar, pronunciations, voice modulation etc. They are facing number of technical and privacy issues.

Teachers are working in a great pressure during this time. Sometimes it took a lot of time to make them understand various assignments on the phone. Work burden has doubled, with no time schedule and privacy. Students or parent messages or call anytime and reply is expected in urgency. Body language and eye contact, which are important cues for the teacher, are difficult to perceive in an online classes. In addition, science and technology programs often include hands-on laboratory sessions, dissertation projects and field trips to complement theoretical studies. This aspect of learning is severely limited in online education.

Using the internet for

entertainment is common, but for online lessons is a big challenge. Teachers may not be well-versed with creating digital content, and conveying it effectively online. A sudden expectation from them to upgrade, and from students to adapt, is unfair.

Lack of computer knowledge is also becoming a major obstacle for village students. Teachers in villages are not technically skilled. Due to inadequate facilities and resources those teachers are incompetent to provide proper education. The concept of distant learning is not properly functional in rural areas and small towns. Providing multiple sets of computers in families with more than one child is also challenging. Finally, education is not just about subject knowledge but also about developing social skills and sportsmanship among the students, which is built over years. Relying solely on online education may hinder the holistic development of children, and many may underperform later in their professional and personal lives. Online education revolution still remains a dream in larger part of our country. Academic experts, industry, students and faculty, all need to be trained before adapting to the new way of online education like Massive open online courses (MOOC) platforms. In the push for online education post-pandemic, what needs to be factored in is that the poorest of poor students are not left out as they do not have the resources to access it. It may widen the inequalities in the socio-



economic fabric of Indian society. All our policies and interventions should strive to be inclusive, with regard to online education. Online education can be made more effective, accessible and safer through various online resources, training programs and schemes developed for students, teachers and educational institutions. India needs to have good vision, sincere efforts and balanced implementation for every section of society.

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