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RESEARCH ARTICLE

COVID-19 IN INDIA: EDUCATION DISRUPTED AND LESSONS LEARNED

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Abstract

In India, 320 million students have been affected by COVID-19 school closures, and though the government quickly recommended shifting to “online teaching,” this ignores India’s immense digital divide—with embedded gender and class divides. The 2017-18 National Sample Survey reported only 23.8 percent of Indian households had internet access. In rural households (66 percent of the population), only 14.9 percent had access, and in urban households only 42 percent had access. And males are the primary users: 16 percent of women had access to mobile internet, compared to 36 percent of men. Young people’s access is even less: A recent news report stated only 12.5 percent of students had access to smartphones. Furthermore, most teachers are ill-equipped for online teaching.

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Introduction:-

Much has been written about how COVID-19 is affecting people in rich countries but less has been reported on what is happening in poor countries. Paradoxically, the first images of COVID-19 that India associates with are not ventilators or medical professionals in ICUs but of migrant laborers trudging back to their villages hundreds of miles away, lugging their belongings. With most of the economy shut down, the fragility of India’s labour market was patent. It is estimated that in the first wave, almost 10 million people returned to their villages, half a million of them walking or bicycling. After the economic stoppage, the International Labour Organization has projected that 400 million people in India risk falling into poverty. Agriculture is the largest employer, at 42 percent of the workforce, but produces just 18 percent of GDP. Over 86 percent of all agricultural holdings have inefficient scale (below 2 hectares). Suppressed incomes due to low agricultural productivity prompt rural-urban migration. Migration is circular, as workers return for some seasons, such as harvesting. Evidence of Indian labour market segmentation is widely available—with a small percentage of workers being employed formally, while the lion’s share of households relies on income from self-employment or precarious jobs without recourse to rights stipulated by labour regulations. Only about 10 percent of the workforce is formal with safe working conditions and social security. Perversely, modern-sector employment is becoming “informalized,” through outsourcing or hiring without direct contracts. The share of formal employment in the modern sector fell from 52 percent in 2005 to 45 percent in 2012. During this period, formal employment went up from 33.41 million to 38.56 million (about 15 percent), while non-agricultural informal employment increased from 160.83 million to 204.03 million (about 25 percent). Most informal workers labour for micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) that emerged as intermediate inputs and services suppliers to the modern sector. However, workers struggle to get paid, which the government identifies as great challenge. Payroll and other taxes, as well as limited access to subsidized credit for large firms, are disincentives to MSME growth. Although over half of India has smartphone access, relatively few can telework.

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Retail and manufacturing jobs require physical presence involving direct client interaction. Indeed, income for families unable to telework has fallen faster.

The government's crisis response has mitigated damage, with a fiscal stimulus of 20 trillion rupees, almost 10 percent of GDP. Also, the Reserve Bank of India enacted decisive expansionary monetary policy. Yet, banks accessed only 520 billion rupees out of the emergency guaranteed credit window of 3 trillion rupees. In fact, corporate credit in June is lower than June last year by a wide margin after bank lending's fall. S&P has estimated the nonperforming loans would increase by 14 percent this fiscal year. Corporations have deleveraged retiring old debts and hoarding cash, as have households. Recovery through investment and consumption has stalled. These trends are exacerbated due to the pandemic. The manufacturing Purchasing Managers Index (PMI) recovered 50 percent since May but at 47.2 it remains in negative territory. Services contribute over half of GDP but its PMI, even after bouncing back, remains low at 33.7 in June. Consumption of electricity, petrol, and diesel have regained from the lockdown lows but are still 10-18 percent below June 2019 levels. Agriculture has been the bright spot, with 50 percent higher monsoon crop sowing and fertilizer consumption up 100 percent. Unemployment levels had spiked to 23.5 percent but with a mid-June recovery to 8.5 percent—and then crept up again marginally.

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MNREGA) and supply of subsidized food grains have acted as useful buffers keeping unemployment down and ensuring social stability. Thirty-six million people sought work in May 2020 (25 million in May 2019). This went up to 40 million in June 2020 (average of 23.6 million during 2013-2019 period). The government has ramped up allocation to the highest level ever, totalling 1 trillion rupees. Similarly, in addition to a heavily subsidized supply of rice and wheat, a special scheme of free supply of 5 kilograms of wheat/rice per person for three months was started and since extended by another three months, covering 800 million people. There have also been cash transfers of 500 billion rupees to women and farmers.

However, MNREGA has an upper bound of 100 days guaranteed employment and it also does not cover urban areas. Agriculture cannot absorb more labour, with massive underlying disguised unemployment. A post-pandemic survey shows that the MSME sector expects earnings to fall up to 50 percent this year. Critically, the larger firms are perceived healthier. However, small and micro enterprises, who have minimal access to formal credit, constitute 99.2 percent of all MSMEs. These are the largest source of employment outside agriculture. Their inability to bounce back could see India face further economic and social tensions. The economy is withstanding both supply and demand shocks, with the wholesale prices index declining sharply. We identified labour market pressures toward increased poverty, both in the extensive margin (headcount) and intensive margin (deprivation depth). India needs to ramp up MNREGA, introduce a guaranteed urban employment scheme, and boost further cash transfers to poor households. Government efforts have been enormous in macroeconomic policy (fiscal stimulus and monetary loosening) to mitigate adversity but fiscal space is narrowing, requiring the World Bank and other international financial institutions to step up and help avert even greater hardship. Also, ongoing advances towards structural economic policy reforms must continue.

COVID-19 In India: Education Disrupted and Lessons Learned:

In India, 320 million students have been affected by COVID-19 school closures, and though the government quickly recommended shifting to "online teaching," this ignores India's immense digital divide—with embedded gender and class divides. The 2017-18 National Sample Survey reported only 23.8 percent of Indian households had internet access. In rural households (66 percent of the population), only 14.9 percent had access, and in urban households only 42 percent had access. And males are the primary users: 16 percent of women had access to mobile internet, compared to 36 percent of men. Young people's access is even less: A recent news report stated only 12.5 percent of students had access to smartphones. Furthermore, most teachers are ill-equipped for online teaching.

Study Hall Educational Foundation's Response:

This crisis has been a test of the Study Hall Educational Foundation's (SHEF) skills, agility, and resilience. But because we've always taken a holistic approach to education, SHEF—the educational institution where I am founding president and CEO—was well-prepared to respond quickly and adaptively to the inequitable impacts of the coronavirus crisis on the vulnerable and disadvantaged.

A Holistic Response to Whole Lives:

Teachers at Sheff have always looked at their students as "whole persons" and invited them to bring their whole lives into the classroom, with all the challenges. When the country first went into lockdown, teachers connected with

their students by every means possible. This was a challenging task for three-quarters of our teachers whose students were on the wrong side of the digital divide, though teachers were able to connect with about half of their students' families via mobile phones. Teachers galvanized other teachers and students, alumni, and parents to help track down their remaining students, eventually managing to connect with nearly 70 percent of our student body. If It Takes A Village to Raise A Child, We Must Empower the Village To Teach The Child. After making contact, teachers then focused on fear management by spreading accurate information about the crisis, dispelling myths, urging caution, and diffusing panic. Then they found out what the students and families needed. Many students' families had lost livelihoods, had no savings, and needed food. Teachers created an e-flyer with government relief measures, helplines, and locations, and personally helped provide rations and cooked food for those families without documents to access relief services.

Using Digital Volunteers to Teach in A Limited Environment:

Once these basic needs were taken care of, teachers then used whatever digital means were available to teach their students. Teachers galvanized an army of digital volunteers in the communities tasked with sharing the information on their devices to students without access to technology. To reach those low-tech students, teachers used voice messages, text messages, and phone calls. For high-tech students (i.e. with smartphones), teachers sent longer videos and used WhatsApp groups for discussions. To reach girls, most of whom had no access to phones, teachers even called fathers to ask how they were doing and to enlist their support for their daughters' education. So far, the majority of fathers have responded positively, demonstrating how this crisis might be a great opportunity to develop positive relationships with fathers that improve their daughters' education and well-being.

Lessons learned:

While lamentable, the disruption to education systems worldwide offers valuable lessons and provides a unique opportunity to reimagine education, the curriculum, and pedagogy.

Address the digital divide. Technology has the potential to achieve universal quality education and improve learning outcomes. But in order to unleash its potential, the digital divide (and its embedded gender divide) must be addressed. Digital capabilities, the required infrastructure, and connectivity must reach the remotest and poorest communities. Access to technology and the internet is an urgent requirement in the information age. It should no longer be a luxury.

Reorient the curriculum. While teachers are struggling to learn digital ways of communicating with their students, we need to pay close attention to what we teach. Our endeavour to educate children has been guided by the question "Who am I and what is my relationship with the universe and others in it?" This question has taken on even greater relevance during the crisis while decontextualized academic learning and a disproportionate focus on facts and information have been downgraded. This crisis is teaching us that curricula must be grounded in students' realities, cultivating critical, creative, and flexible thinking, resilience, and empathy in students. Developing a symbiotic relationship with our environment has taken on a new urgency, and teachers must help students think about their relationship with the universe and everyone and everything in it. Sheff has demonstrated how the development of social and political consciousness by students should be a major goal of education, and that lessons of equality and core democratic values should be given as much, if not more, importance in the official curricula than math, science, and language lessons. Now is the time for governments to integrate such a curriculum into the national curricular framework.

Empower a wider cadre of teachers. This crisis is forcing teachers to reinvent their roles from that of transferring information to enabling learning. The shift to distance learning has afforded many opportunities to teach differently, encouraging self-learning, providing opportunities to learn from diverse resources, and allowing customized learning for diverse needs through high-tech and low-tech sources. But continuing education amid school closures has also taught us an important lesson about the role of the community in teaching our children. If it takes a village to raise a child, we must empower the village to teach the child. Improving the education system requires a decentralized, democratic community-based approach, where community ownership of education is cultivated. Important for this is the hiring of local teachers (with adequate Dalit and female representation), which increases teachers' accountability to children's families and their ability to empathize with students' lives. If COVID-19 school closures and their related challenges with distance learning have taught us anything, it is that we must liberate learning from outdated curricula and the disproportionate emphasis on information transfer.

Education's Role in Building Back Better for The Planet:

The COVID-19 pandemic is a stark reminder that we live in a socio-ecological system in which our human systems are deeply interconnected with our natural systems. Yet our education systems do not educate us to recognize, respect, or nurture this interdependency. The zoonotic nature of the coronavirus has exposed how human-caused environmental degradation and destruction of wildlife habitats have increased human risk of exposure to new infectious diseases, not to mention contribute to the current climate crisis. At the same time, the COVID-19 economic shutdown has shown how changes in human activity can directly improve the health of the natural world. For example, climate scientists have documented decreases in air and water pollution levels in cities around the world as a result of widespread lockdown measures. The sudden halt in heavy pollution-emitting activities has demonstrated that rapid behavioural change is possible and that addressing the climate crisis is within our collective power. But COVID-19's positive impact on the environment will be short-lived. For long-term change, we need a radically transformative education that will change the way we humans think about, interact with, and care for each other, the natural world, and this planet. And as a result, we must change how our underlying human systems coexist with the natural world in a more sustainable, regenerative way. What would a transformative education for climate action look like? For starters, according to a Brookings analysis forthcoming this winter, it would include basic knowledge of climate change and the development of sustainability competencies (like systems thinking and strategic thinking) and green skills (like coping with uncertainty and working within complexity) to ensure—at a minimum—pro-environmental behaviours and a green job-ready workforce capable of helping us transition to a greener economic model. Beyond leveraging education to help us achieve such practical changes, a transformative education must also set in motion deeper epistemic changes in the way we view the human and natural world—a shift and expansion of our mindsets that enables the political transformations needed in the social and economic structures driving climate change. This means education must include a critical and historical understanding of the destructive relationship between unfettered economic growth and the natural environment. It must also address the social inequities, structural inequalities, and economic injustices underlying both the drivers of climate change and its uneven impacts. And it must illuminate how unequal relations of power are just as destructive to life on this planet as an imbalance in greenhouse gases. Yet, realizing a transformative approach to education will be hard as its implementation would disrupt the status quo. It means highlighting the knowledge, perspectives, and experiences of marginalized, disenfranchised, and invisible populations, including indigenous populations and people of colour, women and girls, and climate refugees. Existing attempts at climate change education have very far to go. The forthcoming analysis, for instance, illustrates that the few national climate change learning strategies that exist today are focused primarily on teaching the technical aspects of climate change mitigation and adaptation. Other studies have shown that climate change education has been overly focused on low-impact technical solutions like recycling and using energy efficient lightbulbs. Far fewer strategies include attention to the social aspects of climate change and sustainable development (e.g., human rights, gender equality, and global citizenship), and high-impact action associated with political statements like avoiding air travel or adopting a plant-based diet. A transformative approach to education would help us achieve the sustained efforts by governments and communities worldwide to take bolder measures to protect the planet. To paraphrase Einstein, we cannot solve existential crises like climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic with the same kind of thinking that led us into these crises. Even the United Nations has proclaimed that “this is a once in a generation opportunity to improve education, alongside economies, to fight the climate crisis.”

Some countries and cities have recognized the opportunity in this pandemic to ensure COVID-19 recovery plans simultaneously address the health of the environment, the economy, and human well-being. However, these “green” recovery discussions are paying little attention to building back better education systems that can help achieve these green visions. At the time of writing, out of all the plans, open letters, and academic studies included in Climate Interactive's Green, Resilient, and Equitable Actions for Transformation database (which is tracking green COVID-19 recovery plans), only the International Energy Agency and the Oxford Smith School of Enterprise and the Environment have explicitly mentioned that education must be prioritized amid COVID-19 recovery plans. Now, we are clearly missing that once in a generation opportunity to transform education. Climate change is a cross-cutting issue that involves diverse sectors such as emergency management, energy, gender, finance, health, labour, transportation, and more. If post-COVID-19 recovery strategies are our opportunity to lay the policy framework for building more resilient communities and a more sustainable society, we need to ensure a new green learning agenda is part of that.

Education Standing Up to The Task of Climate Action:

Amid today's climate crisis, the global education community is faced with the reality that it has done too little too late. Despite the evidence that education, especially of girls, has a strong role to play in both climate adaptation and mitigation, the global education community has done little to advance widescale education efforts for, by, or with K-12 children and youth in school settings around the world. Indeed, where children and youth have taken to the streets to demand climate justice, education officials and teachers have been polarized in terms of whether they should join students in their "school strike for climate," or punish them for truancy.

This rather tepid response, however, is not isolated to youth activism, but rather is symptomatic of the education sector's overall avoidance of climate action. For instance, SDG 4 (related to quality education) nearly sidesteps climate change, rolling it into a broader Target 4.7 that is focused on education for sustainable development, global citizenship education, gender equality, and human rights education. Climate change education, notably, receives a parenthetical acknowledgement, as part of an indicator for SDG 12 (related to sustainable consumption and production). the education sector's lukewarm stance on climate action? Here are three reasons—from which a forthcoming Brookings report will elaborate.

The global education community lacks a radical vision for education. Education systems around the world continue to trumpet the neoliberal, capitalist, patriarchal values of a modern western education system. Such a system posits learners as separate from the non-human world and positions the content that they learn as enabling them to control, dominate, and exploit that world. We see this today in the overemphasis of global education discussions around the learning crisis framed in terms of children's inability to read or to do basic mathematics, affecting their ability to become productive and successful adults who join the labour market and sustain corporate interests. Rarely do we see the learning crisis framed in terms of children's inability to understand concepts like carrying capacity, human dignity, or to engage in planetary thinking. This in turn affects their ability to become sustainability citizens who are not only responsible "to distant people and places and past and future generations" but also stewards of the environment and non-human life.

The global education community won't value what it doesn't measure. While the 2016 UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report—dedicated to the thematic area of "education for people and planet,"—helped to usher the education sector into the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) era, the global education community responded with inertia. Why? In large part, because there isn't an effective accountability mechanism for ensuring the education sector is doing enough to prepare learners to respond to, adapt to, and mitigate against further climate change. Due to conceptual, reporting, and political challenges with measurement, there has been no data collected to date for SDG global indicator 4.7.1—the indicator that measures whether countries are delivering on the vision that all learners have the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development. Setbacks continue to mire efforts by UNESCO Institute for Statistics, the Global Alliance to Monitor Learning (GAML), and other actors to develop a more fulsome data collection methodology.

Teachers lack the systemic support to become change agents. As a result of both the lack of radical vision and the lack of accountability, those individuals on the front lines of classrooms have not been adequately supported to be the change agents our planet needs. An NPR/Ipsos poll shows that in the U.S., 86% of teachers think climate change should be taught in classrooms, yet only 42% teach it. Another study conducted by the National Centre for Science Education shows that more than 25% of science teachers surveyed in the U.S. "give equal time" to perspectives that raise doubt about climate change, and nearly 31% of science teachers send "explicitly contradictory messages" about the cause of climate change. While such classroom practices might be a product of teachers trying to be more inclusive of student experiences, or even a result of pressure from parents or principals to not teach climate change, researchers have shown that these reasons comprise a minority of cases. Rather, such patterns are more likely a result of teachers' own knowledge gaps, as well as a lack of training on how to respond to misinformation about climate change that might arise in the classroom.

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