

Digital Divide: A Major Scupper to Online Learning

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic that struck the entire globe has consequences which are still haunting us. Unlike every sector, the education sector was also taken aback with the sudden shift of teaching and learning towards the digital platform. When the educational institutions were forced to shut down, the online learning was the preferred option available. The developed countries faced less trouble in comparison to the developing countries, when the sudden transition took place. For a developing country like India, with pre-existing inequalities in education, poor infrastructure, inadequate resources, etc. it was quite challenging to carry on the teaching-learning procedure. The upshot of using digital platforms, during the institutional closures, only exacerbated the previous loopholes in education sector and one of them is the Digital Divide. The pandemic showed us that the Digital Divide, which has now been widened, is a major scupper to online learning. The dream of digital India will be successful only if the digital divide is minimized. So, this, article is a discussion on how covid induced learning environment escalated the major obstacle i.e. digital divide in the educational scenario of India.

Keywords: Digital Divide, Online learning, Covid-19, Teaching and Learning]

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic posed serious challenges to education sector in the country and the virtual learning became the “new normal”. As a consequence, the teachers and students had to adjust to the new mode of learning so that there is a seamless delivery of the curriculum (Choubay, S.K., 2020, September 20). India as a developing nation with vast socio-economic differences, inequalities in education among the students as well as among the quality of educational institutions, was not prepared for this sudden shift (The Blog, 2020, June 29).

Again, the pandemic also has brought to light the loopholes that already existed in the digitization of education in the country. Inabilities of teachers and students to access internet, lack of proper electronic gadgets, dearth of electricity, etc. are some of the major issues regarding online classes. As per National Statistical Office report, the internet facility is available only to 24 percent of the Indian households and according to a survey conducted by Ministry of Rural Development in 2017-18, only 33 percent of households receive 9 to 12 hours of electricity daily (Choubay, S.K., 2020, September 20). So, if this is the situation, then it will be wrong to think that digital learning will be successful in India. As per UNESCO (2021), the alternative mode of teaching and learning only exposed the digital divide that already existed in the country.

What is Digital Divide?

“The gap between those who have access to information technology, and those who have not, can be referred to as the digital divide” (Sims, J. et al., 2008, p. 429). It not only refer to those who are financially unable to afford technology or access to connectivity, but also those who lacks in skills of engaging themselves in technology to access learning materials (Sims, J. et al., 2008, p. 429). This gap exists everywhere between the developed and the underdeveloped countries, between the young and old, between educated and uneducated, men and women, etc. It is worth mentioning that in India the divide between the urban and rural is the single biggest factor of Digital divide (Digital Divide in India, 2021, 11 October).

The forced shutdown of schools and colleges during the covid-19 pandemic compelled the use of virtual mode as the only mean of transaction, which actually ensured the continuation of learning. But this continuation of learning through online mode also continued to make remote learning an “operational nightmare” (The Times of India, 2021, 14 November). It can be said that the covid induced learning environment has deepened the existing digital divide in the country.

Covid-19 Deepened the Digital Divide in India: Why

The digital divide which already existed came to limelight, as the teaching-learning had to go virtual. The developed nations soon were able to cope up with the sudden change, but India as a developing nation grappled with the situation. The gap between the rich and the poor is not the lone reason of the divide, but also the lack of skills of using technology, poor internet connectivity, added fuel to the widened digital divide. Before the covid outbreak, when the classes were in offline mode, the digital divide was not a matter of major concern. But the sudden shift to digital learning made it a serious issue as India’s educational setup was clearly not prepared. At very first we need to understand why the digital divide became a major issue for ineffective online learning. Following are some of the reasons as to why the divide existed and why it escalated during the difficult time of the pandemic.

Lack of Digital literacy

The incompetency of some teachers and students to use digital devices has hampered the teaching-learning procedure to a great extent. Many teachers who are not equipped with the skills of using online platform found it difficult in connecting to their students and as a result the online classes could not be conducted in a proper way (Choubey, S.K., 2020, September 02). Moreover, some parents due to their low education are unable to help their child in using various mobile applications and other problems related to virtual classes (Kunhaman, M., 2021, November 19).

Net connectivity and other issues

The issue of accessibility is another major hindrance to digital learning. The network connectivity issues and dearth of electricity in some places makes online learning a challenging task. As, high speed net connectivity is the foremost requirement for online learning, but the fluctuating connections often lead to buffering of the live classes, that eventually put an end to the interest of the students (Upadhyay, A., 2021, July 5).

The survey conducted by the Ministry of Rural Development in 2017-18 revealed that 47% of Indian houses get 12 hours electricity daily and more worse is that more than 36% of schools in India don’t have electricity (Modi, S. & Postaria, R., 2020, October 5). If electricity is not available to a lot of households in the country, then it would be a nightmare for the students as well as for teachers to connect for online classes.

Socio-economic differences

One of the biggest factors of the digital inequality lies in the socio-economic differences of the students. The socio-economic gap burdened the inequality in education during the institutional closures as the students had to suddenly shift to their digital gadgets. In India, the parents belonging from the poor background are either unable to afford Smartphone or struggle to meet the demands of their child's expenses for online classes (Upadhyay, A., 2021, July 5; Kunhman, M., 2021, November 19). Thus it is very much clear that students belonging to poor household faced difficulty in shifting to online learning and as a result their learning got affected severely.

Digital Divide: Exacerbated India's Existing Problems

India was already overburdened with a lot of challenges and the digital divide which was exposed by online learning exacerbated some of the already existing challenges in Education. Learning loss, widened inequalities, psychological impact, increased dropout, etc are some of the problems discussed below:

Learning loss fueled by digital divide during covid crisis

The digital divide has adversely affected the learning of numerous students in the country and one of the negative repercussions it had is the learning loss or the learning deficit. It means the students have not acquired the minimum knowledge level as per their standard. As per a report by UNESCO, 2021 the learning loss in India escalated as a result of the lack of accessibility to remote learning. The country was already overwhelmed with the learning loss of the students. Now during the online classes when there are accessibility issues, technical issues, financial problem etc, we can imagine how much the damage has been done. The learning loss during the school closures can be witnessed more among the poor families. The students who were unable to access to online learning were promoted but without the minimum knowledge. Eventually, those students will not be able to catch up when they return to schools.

Widened the Inequalities in Education

The covid crisis showed that online learning in India is a commodity that can be afforded only by a few (Upadhyay, A., 2021, July 5). The Supreme Court (SC) of India pointed out that the digital divide which has been caused by the online classes violated the fundamental right of every poor child to study in mainstream schools (Digital Divide in Education, 2021, 11 October). India, was already struggling with the existing inequalities in education, be it the socio-economic inequalities, gender inequalities, regional differences, or differences in the quality of educational institutions. The digital divide which has been further widened by the online classes also widened the inequalities in education. If we ask as how much effective online learning was? Then the answer would be that it is effective only for those who can afford better technology, have ample access to internet, combined with the required skills to use it (Naik, G., et al., 2021). The students with resources continued to learn but the poorest children were largely affected. Again, the children from remote areas, rural background having poor net connectivity suffered the most, as they could not join online classes even though they had the technology with them.

TeamLease Edtech, in their recent survey reported that woman participation have been declined in education during the online classes, and the reason found out to be their incompetency to use digital devices (Gohain, M., 2021, July 7). In addition to this, those girls' students who are living in remote areas with low internet connectivity or are unable to afford smart phones faced a lot of trouble in engaging in online classes. It can be imagined that the incompetency of using digital devices, lack of resources, made the situation of woman education in country worse (Upadhyay, A., 2021, July 5). Moreover, the girls in vulnerable

households tend to be more involved in domestic responsibilities, which in turn prompted by their inability to access to internet or digital devices or might be because of the priority given to male child (Modi, S. & Postaria, R., 2020, October 5). Thus, they were getting away from their education during school closures. So, lack of woman participation in learning also adds to ineffective online learning during the covid crisis.

Psychological impact

The prolonged lockdown combined with the lack of accessibility and affordability to online learning, created one more challenging task for the underprivileged students, as they had to keep pace with their peers and studies. As a result, those students who could not access to e-learning, feel isolated and left behind. Not only the students but the teachers also struggled as many teachers were also not equipped with using new technologies (Modi, S., & Postaria, R., 2020, October 5). The degrading mental health of many students and teachers resulting from the unavailability, inaccessibility, or incompetency to use technology during school shutdown has exposed that India has a long way to go before it can make education digitized.

Increased Dropout Rates

As discussed above, the students had to go through a lot of challenges when the classes went online. Fluctuating internet connections due to poor network, or no network in many areas resulted in decreased motivation among the students, which killed the interest of students, leading to increased dropout rate, especially among girls during the period of the covid crisis (Upadhyay, A., 2021, July 5). It is feared that many children might not have returned to school after the covid lockdown.

Conclusion

India is country with a humongous population with diverse needs. If digital learning is to become successful in India, then the policy makers have to think out of the box so that it create a learning ecosystem that will encompass the needs of every stakeholder. The problems that have been doubled due to the prolonged lockdown need innovative solution. Research must be conducted at the ground level to gain proper insight of the difficulties the students and teachers had to go through during their online classes.

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