

## COVID-19, CHILDREN AND EDUCATION SYSTEM

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### **Abstract**

*The outbreak of COVID-19 poses a significant threat to public health, with far-reaching consequences for global health security, travel, and trade. The virus's high transmission rate has sparked widespread concern among health organizations and regulatory authorities. In response to the pandemic, UNESCO has recommended distance learning programs to minimize education disruption. However, the pandemic's impact is unevenly distributed, affecting children from diverse backgrounds, including those from low-income families, marginalized communities, and rural areas. The shift to online learning has exacerbated existing inequalities, with many children lacking access to digital platforms and devices. This digital divide has not only widened the learning gap but also pushed numerous children out of the education system. This paper examines the benefits and drawbacks of virtual and blended learning models on children during the pandemic.*

### **Keywords**

*COVID-19, Children, Education, Online Classes and Online Crime*

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## **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic, caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, was first detected in Wuhan, China in December 2019. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared a global health emergency and later a pandemic, citing unprecedented global social and economic disruption. The pandemic has had a devastating impact, resulting in widespread illness, death, and economic recession. The global health crisis has changed dramatically since February 2020, with the virus spreading rapidly worldwide. Common symptoms of COVID-19 include fever, cough, and breathing problems, which can lead to pneumonia. To combat the spread, extensive precautions are necessary, such as hygiene protocols, social distancing, and mask-wearing. The virus is spreading exponentially, prompting countries to impose restrictions, including banning gatherings, enforcing quarantine, and lockdowns to control the spread of the disease.

## **Protecting Children During Covid-19**

Children who have experienced parental loss are at risk of severe and long-lasting consequences, including health problems, physical abuse, sexual violence, and trafficking. The government's efforts aim to provide necessary support and protection to these children. The Indian government has taken initiatives to support children who have lost parents or caregivers due to COVID-19. The Ministry of Women and Child Development has invoked the Juvenile Justice Act, of 2015, to provide care and protection to these vulnerable children. The Centre government has informed the Delhi High Court that it has asked the State to ensure immediate action for the rehabilitation of children or orphaned due to COVID-19, in accordance with the provision of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act and leveraging the facilities under child protection service. The Ministry of Women and Child Development said that children in distressed situations such as those affected by the pandemic are mandated care and protection under the Juvenile Justice Act, of 2015. This Act provides a safety net of statutory service delivery structure along with provisions of institutional and non-institutional care and protection of children in need of care and protection of children in conflict with law (The Hindu, 2021).

In India, a global study suggested, that almost 1,2 lakh children lost one of their parents, 25,000 lost their mother and 90,751 lost their father and at least 12 children lost both their parents. According to the study published in The Lancet one of the top medical journals, there was an 8.5-fold increase in the number of children orphaned (43,139) in April 2021 compared to March 2021 (5,091) in India. Children who have lost a parent or caregiver are at risk of profound short and long-term adverse effects on their health, safety and well-being such as increased risk of disease, physical abuse, sexual violence like trafficking and adolescent pregnancy (TOI, 2021).

### **Emotional Trouble Amid Children**

The second wave of the pandemic has triggered widespread anxiety and panic, with children being particularly vulnerable to its psychological and mental health impacts. Service providers are facing challenges in supporting children's mental health needs amidst placement and safety concerns (The Hindu, 2021). According to UNICEF, approximately one in seven children experienced anxiety, depression, and isolation during stay-at-home policies in 2020. Urban working-class children were disproportionately affected. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds, including those living on the streets, have turned to substance abuse to cope with the situation (Trivedi, 2021). The worries of adults can be transmitted to children, making them anxious and fearful. Prolonged isolation can lead to boredom, anger, and frustration in children. Without outdoor play and socialization, they may become increasingly engrossed in social media and online entertainment, exacerbating social isolation. Parents must find ways to engage children, provide opportunities for learning new skills, and encourage participation in activities. Children with special needs require innovative approaches to stay engaged and active. The shift to online classes has created a digital divide, with students from poor backgrounds lacking access to smartphones, computers, or internet connections. Only a few state governments have introduced schemes to address this issue, leaving many students at risk of dropping out.

### **Impact on the Learning System**

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted educational systems globally, with widespread school closures affecting over 825 million learners. In India, the nationwide lockdown has disrupted the entire education system, prompting the government to introduce online education. However, online classes have limitations, including the lack of interaction, teacher body language, and physical activities. The sudden shift to online learning has also exacerbated existing issues, such as student debt, digital learning, food insecurity, and homelessness. The pandemic has highlighted social and economic issues, including interrupted learning, compromised nutrition, childcare problems, and economic costs to families. Disadvantaged children and their families have been disproportionately affected (Doucet et al., 2020). To mitigate these issues, UNESCO recommends distance learning programs and open educational applications. The Indian Council of Medical Research suggests reopening primary schools first and ensuring vaccination of supporting staff. The pandemic has also underscored the importance of schools as safe spaces for children. Denial of education can result in learning losses and denial of livelihood opportunities. On a positive note, the pandemic has prompted students to establish routines and rebuild their schedules according to prevailing norms.

### **The Hammering of Learning to Girl Children**

Reopening schools in India is crucial to reducing COVID-19 cases and ensuring girls' education continues uninterrupted. Schools have empowered girls to break free from traditional household chores and become contributing members of society. However, with schools closed, girls are reverting to traditional roles, and some are even being encouraged to drop out. The pandemic's impact on education is devastating, particularly for young girls. With families struggling economically, issues like child labor and child marriage are rising. Many girls who previously stayed home while their families worked are now accompanying their parents to work, and some are missing out on essential meals provided by schools. The closure of schools disproportionately affects low-income families, where boys are often prioritized over girls. Girls are seen as a means to gain financial stability through child marriage, which has increased during the pandemic. To address this crisis, the Indian government, non-profits, and international organizations must work together to promote girls' education and reduce the gap in school enrollment between boys and girls. This includes addressing the digital divide, redesigning school curricula, and providing funding that prioritizes girls' education. If left unaddressed, the pandemic could lead to a million more girls and transgender children dropping out of school, particularly those living in poverty, with disabilities, or in rural areas. Economic hardships will exacerbate the issue, making it essential to prioritize girls' education and provide support to families to ensure their daughters can continue learning.

### **Spiky Rise in Child Marriage During Pandemic**

A UNICEF report reveals that over 200 million girls in India are forced into early marriage, with 100 million marrying before the age of 15. Child marriage has devastating consequences, including physical and mental health damage, unwanted pregnancies, miscarriages, and malnutrition. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the issue, with rising poverty levels and lockdown conditions contributing to an increase in child marriages. Parents are also concerned about the risk of sexual harassment during lockdown. According to the Department of Women and Child Welfare, child marriages have surged across the country. In West Bengal, poor migrant workers who lost their jobs due to the lockdown are returning home and arranging marriages for their young daughters, citing reduced wedding costs and the transfer of financial responsibility to the in-laws. The Calcutta High Court has intervened, directing police superintendents to investigate whether these marriages are driven by economic necessity or child trafficking. The court has also ordered immediate legal action against those involved in child marriage.

### **Pandemic and Online Crime Against Children**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, everything has become online from work to education. The people get trapped in their own homes with the only available facility i.e. INTERNET. As per the Government guidelines, everyone is using the Internet connection for the purpose of fulfilling their work. Children have the only option of taking online classes for the betterment of their future because every institution, and academic organizations are closed. The children and the parents are bound to depend upon the internet for the sake of keeping themselves updated with all the external happenings. There are a lot of various apps and sites which require personal information and to access the same an individual has to submit the same. Online stalkers use the given information to stalk anyone easily and being a child it's not easy to check out the authenticity of a Site or Application. Some of the crimes committed online are-

**Cyber Stalking:** -Stalking a person without his knowledge is itself an illicit action. In the age of the Internet where the people rely upon the social networks, like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram and etc. for different purposes and use the same as a source of getting information and keep themselves updated as well as share photos and videos of themselves as per their own desire, always forget that there are always been some stalkers whose profession is stalking with the evil intention. To stalk someone by using the methods of electronic media or communication is called Cyber Stalking. The easy availability of Internet provides enormous opportunities to the Online Stalkers. Online stalking is further used by the offender for blackmailing, extortion; and exploitation and sometimes the people become the victim of sexual offense as a result of cyberstalking (Prasad, 2021)

**Cyberbullying:** - Cyberbullying is a bit similar to cyberstalking. It's a kind of online cybercrime where a person or a group of people by the use of electronic media make abusive comments, make audio & videos, and send threatening messages for the purpose of humiliating and bullying the others. A large number of crimes are reported against children these days which are related to cyberbullying.

**Online Child Trafficking & Extortion:** - The use of the Internet plays a vital role in crimes like Child Trafficking. Nowadays, as technology becomes the need of time, and children become the victims of Online Child trafficking where the innocent children get persuaded and trapped. Child trafficking is being done for the purpose of sexual exploitation, extortion, trafficking, etc. As Children have the inability to resist a hazard or to respond when a danger occurs easily trust anyone and then get trapped. The person with evil intent starts blackmailing the children which leads to demand for money, sexual abuse, mental trauma, etc. due to which

many of the children lose their lives. The greatest effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on children is cybercrimes which put the children in the dock, who are now experiencing because of the limitations inside homes, online classes and so forth. The limitations and absence of free development have prompted colossal expansion in the online interaction with all over the world.

### **Government Initiative**

The Indian government has taken steps to fight the deadly virus and continue the education system, which are-

**Protective Steps:** To combat the COVID-19 pandemic, the Indian government implemented a series of proactive measures. These included rigorous screenings and mandatory quarantines for international travelers, as well as a temporary suspension of all visas, except for diplomatic and employment purposes. The government also sealed international borders and halted railway operations to minimize the spread of the virus.

Additionally, all non-essential public places, including educational institutions, recreational facilities, shopping centers, and hospitality services, were closed to prevent large gatherings and potential transmission hotspots.

**Monetary Steps:** In response to the pandemic's economic fallout, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) implemented emergency measures to stimulate the economy. These measures included slashing interest rates to historic lows, and injecting liquidity worth over Rs. 3.7 lakh crores, and implementing a 3-month moratorium on loan repayments. To provide further relief, the government deferred tax filing deadlines and introduced relief packages worth Rs. 1.7 lakh crores, comprising food assistance and direct cash transfers. Additionally, shelter homes and other support services were established to aid low-income households, migrant workers, and daily wage laborers impacted by the crisis.

**Instructive Steps:** To combat the growing panic and disseminate accurate information, the government provides reliable data on the virus, its spread, prevention, and guidelines on the Ministry of Health's official website.

The pandemic has transformed the traditional face-to-face learning model in schools, replacing it with alternative modes such as online learning, TV, mobile, radio, and textbooks. While these alternatives are commendable, they have limitations. They do not guarantee equal access to quality learning for all students due to factors like unequal teacher attention, disparate access to digital devices, and inadequate home support.

The closure of schools may result in learning losses and deficiencies in achieving learning outcomes. To address this, states, UTs, and the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) have been working to provide education through

alternative means, such as distributing textbooks, telephonic guidance, online content, and activity-based learning.

To address concerns about learning gaps and losses, the MHRD tasked the NCERT with constituting a committee comprising academic experts. The committee conducted a survey to gather information about digital modes used by students and concerns about unequal access to digital devices. Discussions were also held with SCERTs to gather information about state-level initiatives. Based on the committee's recommendations and reports from states/UTs, guidelines for Learning Enhancement (LE) during the pandemic were prepared, focusing on:

- i. Learning Enhancement for students without digital devices
- ii. Learning Enhancement for students with limited digital accessibility
- iii. Learning Enhancement for students with digital devices

### **Strategy for Children of Migrant Labourers**

(a) To support children of migrant laborers, guidelines have been established to facilitate their admission into local government schools. These guidelines simplify the enrolment process, requiring only a valid identity card and eliminating the need for additional documentation.

(b) Additionally, the guidelines recommend that students from residential schools be granted temporary admission to schools closer to their homes. This provision acknowledges that many students may not be able to return to their residential schools during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Conclusion**

The Covid-19 lockdown has brought about unparalleled transformations globally. Despite facing an invisible enemy, humans have demonstrated remarkable adaptability and bravery. Similar to other sudden crises, the lockdown caught us off guard, evoking initial feelings of dismay, confusion, and shock. As reality set in, we gradually accepted that the lockdown would be a prolonged measure, prompting us to adapt and find ways to navigate this new reality. Online and blended modes of education started in India started during the pandemic, which forced almost all the educational institutions from various fields, sections and sections to shift from traditional offline education to online. It is observed that sudden changes in the institution of education have impacted the society as they always did starting with free education during the Vedic period to the commodification of education to digitalized education at the present time.

In this transitory stage we find now the rate of students' time spent with gadgets from various age groups has increased, they getting highly addicted to phones

or laptops it seems like books will become extinct within the next decade. Now teachers and students are doing classes from the comfort of houses. Expenditure on transport has become nearly negative. People who had to leave their education in the middle due to various reasons can now restart that from their choice of institute. A wide range of services and businesses has come up and hiked to satisfy various needs of the hour like Zoom, Google Meet etc. However it cannot be ignored that the present condition has made kids from a very young age are exposed to hours spent in front of laptop or mobile screen, then comes the secondary and higher secondary students who are doing online classes but what is their level of attention? From observation it is found most students use other apps in the background while attending classes, The online mode of exams has promoted the open book exam concept where students give exams, play online games, spending hours on games and social media is a common scenario for all. Gap is found in the structure of online education among private and public sectors, among various levels of education. Many students are dropping out of school as they are unable to cope up with the high cost of internet, and education fees as Covid- 19 had impacted many families economically. Private institutions are well known for providing education at high cost in this time of distress where many have lost their jobs and are losing these premium institutions continue to charge the same level of fees for which many students and families are facing tough challenges. A significant amount of working young mothers are facing a huge burden as their part of work has increased since the lockdown, they are also having to spend more time on their kids as the moms' of primary section kids are mostly doing the online classes. Presently the system has various loopholes that must be fixed as early as possible to make the online education system successful in the future. There are some pitfalls that should be mitigated to make the online education system better and more attractive.

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