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Research Article

Digital Divide in Online Education : Challenges and Way Forward for India Post COVID19

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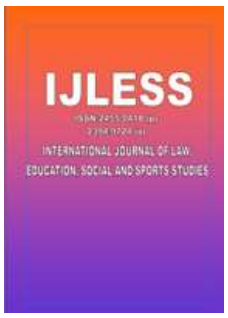

ABSTRACT

The cognitive skills help humans adapt to changes and accept new ideas that challenge their existing notions about life and nature. "The truth is that man is being educated ceaselessly by everything in this infinite world" (Vinobā, 2005). The learning never ends for the rational being said Vinobha Bhave. Humanity has seen, in the course of its existence, many challenges in the form of wars, epidemics, natural calamities as well as man-made disasters such as Bhopal gas tragedy and Chernobyl disaster. History testifies to the fact that all these threats to human existence whether natural or man-made have helped humanity strengthen its resolve for survival and better future ahead by using developments in Science and Technology. However, the current crisis caused by social distancing norms and infection risk amid ongoing COVID19 pandemic is something that the world has never seen before in terms of scale and impact. The virus has caused nationwide lockdown in various countries and poses an immense threat to local as well as the global economy. It has influenced lives and livelihoods to an unimaginable extent and continues to pose a threat to the economic, social, and physical well being of people across the globe.

The current crisis also manifests the fault lines in the digital infrastructure in the education sector more so in the developing countries such as India. In this context, this paper attempts to highlight certain challenges faced by the Indian Education System in this time of crisis and the way forward. This paper will also set out to assess the adaptability of the Indian Education System to embrace virtual teaching-learning methods as necessitated by the ongoing crisis. As this paper takes shape while the crisis is still ongoing, it would be prudent to accept that this is a work in progress and further research should be undertaken constantly according to the dynamic scenario that unfolds.

Keywords: Online Education, Indian Education System, Covid19, digital infrastructure, Virtualization of education, online learning.

The corona outbreak has pushed schools, colleges, and universities to consider conducting online classes. Such an arrangement of online classes will presume that the participants have basic facilities to attend virtual classes such as smartphones, computers or laptops, High-speed Internet connection, and most importantly electricity at their disposal. These facilities, it seems, are available to a large number of Indian students but it would be wrong to assume that students from rural, semi-urban, and poor

families will have access to electricity and Internet speed the way their city and privileged counterparts have.

According to a report by the World Bank, "India is doing 'extremely well' on Electrification with nearly 85% of the country's population having access to electricity" (Jha, 2018). The report, while admitting that India has many challenges to address, gives a positive picture of the state of rural electrification in India. It says close to 85% of India's population has access to electricity. Now let us see India's definition of Electrification.

"The government considers a village to be electrified if the number of households electrified is at least 10% and electricity is provided to public buildings including schools, health centres, dispensaries, community centres and village councils. So, by definition, all Indian villages have now been electrified. But government data shows that every household has access to electricity in just six Indian states - Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Punjab, Goa, and Gujarat" (*India says all villages have electricity* 2018).

This report by BBC gives the other side of the picture wherein the findings show that 85% of electrification may mean a far lesser percentage of households actually accessing electricity on a daily basis. This means that infrastructural challenges concerning accessibility of electricity need to be acknowledged and addressed before we can take a leap to virtual classrooms or any major step in that direction.

India faces a similar challenge with regards to affordable high-speed Internet connectivity to rural villages and other remote locations. Even in cities, certain locations do not have high-speed Internet and village-dwellers will have to wait for far too long before such Internet speed reaches their smartphones. In India "Percentage of number of wireless data subscribers over total wireless subscribers increased from 36.32% at the year ending 2017 to 49.17% at the year ending 2018….. number of 4G data subscribers increased manifold from 86.68 million at the end of year 2016 to 436.12 million at the year ending 2018" (TRAI, Wireless Data Services In India 2019). This huge growth in 4G data subscribers between 2016-2018 is undoubtedly the gift of revolutionary change brought by Reliance Jio which intensified the competition among telecom service providers leading to a drastic reduction in 4G LTE data prices in India.

However, the number of such 4G users is only 436.12 million at the end of the year 2018, which is just slightly above 37% of the total of 1176 million wireless subscribers. This is beyond doubt that a large number of people in India now own a mobile phone and spend considerable time on the Internet. But it is also very important to take into account the regional and rural-urban disparity into account. According to a report published jointly by the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) and KANTAR-IMRB "With 59% penetration, urban India is expected to show a slowdown, while rural India with only 18% mobile internet penetration is clearly the next area of growth" (Gupta, 2018). The rural-urban divide with regards to mobile penetration in India shows that various reasons prominent among them are illiteracy, lack of electricity, internet infrastructure, and affordability of the devices play a key role in mobile penetration in India.

The states such as Jharkhand, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Arunachal Pradesh and Rajasthan lacking the required infrastructures for telecommunication and the internet have also raised concerns about the viability of conducting online classes. In an article published in *The Indian Express,* at a meeting with the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), several states flagged the digital and infrastructural gap. According to a governmental official, "Rajasthan pointed out that roughly 15% of its students don't have access to a digital device. The Jharkhand education secretary said that almost 30% of the state is a shadow region of sorts with poor internet connectivity. Arunachal too suffers from poor internet connectivity" (Chopra, 2020). Such a digital divide not only hinders online education but potentially perpetuates pre-existing educational disparity among various states. The MHRD and state

Education Departments need to engage with various ministries such as The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, Ministry of Science and Technology, Ministry of Communications as well as private stakeholders to work towards bridging this digital divide.

The smartphone now seems ubiquitous but not all families can afford to give their ward a smartphone of their own. Even if we consider that students do have access to a smartphone of their own or their parents, the affordability of data packs is a major concern. A few extremely unfortunate cases have come to light where two girls have committed suicide allegedly for not having a smartphone to attend online classes. An article in Tribune India reported "Underscoring this grave scenario was the protests held by students in the South last week in the wake of the 14-year-old daughter of an impoverished daily worker of Kerala committing suicide because she was unable to attend online classes for want of Internet or TV. Now, the teenaged daughter of a farm labourer of a Mansa village in Punjab is purported to have taken the extreme step as she succumbed to the stress of not affording the smartphone, an essential tool to attend online classes" (Tribune News Service, 2020). While many families can afford the required facilities for online classes of their ward, there remains a section of the population for which government support and intervention is required for universal virtualization of education in India.

Another aspect that needs to be discussed in light of the virtualization of education in India is the training of the teachers with regards to the use of online video conferencing tools. In the majority of government schools in India, teachers are not well-equipped to use software and video conferencing tools. The MHRD has taken steps to ensure teachers are trained to make a shift towards virtual classes. In this regard, MHRD recently released a notification that organized various courses and online sessions on its' Innovative Cell. MHRD has also launched the DIKSHA (National Digital Infrastructure for Teachers) platform to train the teachers of class I to XII and equip them to hold online classes.

For the ease of readers, one could draw a parallel between the traditional way of teaching or Classroom teaching and Virtual or Online teaching as far as their challenges and solutions are concerned. We cannot deny the fact that the problem which the traditional method of classroom learning faces is being faced by online classroom learning as well.

The Indian government in the year 2009 passed "The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009" which provides the right to free and compulsory education to every child of the age of six to fourteen years in a neighborhood school (RTE Act 2009). The state has made education free and compulsory for children of six to fourteen years of age. With the same resolve, the government of both state and central level should cooperate in the field of education once again to make online education available, affordable, and accessible to all. At the same time, the government needs to invest resources in teachers' training in order for them to be able to teach effectively using ICT tools. The challenge that we face in our way towards virtualization of education is multifaceted. The challenge is to make quality education available, accessible, and affordable to all the students irrespective of their place of residence or their financial standing. The keyword is definitely 'quality education' otherwise instead of being a boon for the education sector, the virtual class will become a burden and it might eventually lead to more dropouts than what we have seen in its traditional form.

The affordability and accessibility of education are inextricably linked to the affordability and accessibility of electricity, high-speed Internet services in the area concerned, of mobile or computer devices, etc. Hence, it is imperative for the authorities to establish a community learning centre where students of underprivileged sections can continue their education while ensuring social distancing and health safety protocols. The lecture series started by various governments on Television and Radio channels is a welcome step in this regard where one radio or television can help several students of the same class attend necessary lectures. "Maharashtra wants the Centre to allot it 12-hour daily air time on national television for broadcasting school lessons. It has also sought a two-hour slot on All India

Radio (AIR) for coaching students" (Ashar, 2020). Such other innovative classroom ideas need to be implemented across states in regional languages or preferably in the mother tongue of the students concerned. It will greatly increase the learning outcomes since ease of understanding the content and language of the lectures is a sine qua non of effective learning.

In order to address the challenge of the digital divide, it is important for governments to take a detailed survey to assess the digital divide prevalent in the country. For such a task, governments' own resources might seem insufficient and hence other private and non-governmental organisations should be invited for participation. The assistance of various NGOs and a flexible public-private partnership approach can prove to be useful in assessing and addressing the current challenges faced by the Indian education sector. In order for online education to be inclusive for all special measures must be taken to ensure that differently-abled students especially students with hearing or visual difficulty can also access and participate in online classrooms with ease. It is also high time when the government of both states and the centre should consider an increase in the education expenditure to bridge the digital gap and ensure affordable, accessible and quality education for all.

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