

Covid- 19 Pandemic and Educational Challenges in India: A Situational Analysis

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Abstract

The novel Corona Virus (COVID-19) has created significant challenges in the teaching, learning and evaluation process. The pandemic has significantly disrupted the school education across the country especially in the state of Assam. The process of teaching, learning as well as assessment methodologies are severely affected by this pandemic situation. Only a handful of private schools could adopt online teaching methods. On the other hand, government schools and few private schools especially in rural areas have been completely shut down for not having access to the e- resources. It is a great challenge to keep children's education on the track while they are staying indoors. Hence, the investigators attempted to examine the present status of teaching, learning and evaluation in the secondary schools of Assam. Further, an investigation has also been done to find out the problems faced by the students in practicing online classes in rural areas. Lastly, the paper tries to find out the challenges faced by the teachers and parents during the pandemic period. The study has been conducted in the Barkhetri Block of Nalbari district, Assam. From the study it has been found that the secondary school students in rural areas are facing lots of problems in practicing online classes. The teachers and parents also faced lots of incongruities to keep their children active in the learning process similar to the regular classroom teaching activities.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, Government and private Secondary Schools, online education, rural areas

Introduction

The corona virus (COVID-19) pandemic has significantly disrupted the school education. In the 2nd week of March, 2020 state governments across the country begun shutting down educational institutions temporarily as a measure to contain the spread of corona virus. It has affected more than 4.5 million people worldwide (WHO). According to the UNESCO report, it had affected more than 90% of total world's student population during mid April 2020 which is gradually decreased to nearly 67% during June 2020. As per the UNESCO report, about 14 cores of primary teachers and 13 cores of secondary students are affected. (Jena, 2020)

After the 1st wave of COVID -19 the schools, colleges and universities were reopened in the year 2021 in new normal situation with focus on virtual education. But suddenly the 2nd wave of COVID -19 has been started all over the India. The COVID -19 vaccines were launched on 16th January, 2021 in India. But before completion of vaccination process among all the age groups, the 2nd wave of COVID-19 spread all over the country. The 2nd wave seems more dangerous as the entire health sector has been jeopardized with the shortage of oxygen cylinder and lack of ICU beds for COVID patients. In this crucial time the state government has given instructions to close down all educational institutions without taking any risk and asked for preferring online teaching at all educational levels. For COVID-19

pandemic all annual examinations of classes I to IX has been cancelled in the academic year of 2020. On the basis of internal examination students were promoted to next standard.

In Assam the academic session of the schools under the Secondary Education Board of Assam (SEBA) has been altered. The Board examination of Class X under the CBSE has been cancelled and that of under the SEBA has been postponed. Uncertainty of conduction of examination de-motivates the students. The students have started losing their self-confidence and future aspirations. This is a great challenge for the education system. The teachers, students and parents were not ready for education in the online mode. The 2nd wave of COVID-19 severely affects the entire education system. The structure of schooling and learning, including teaching and assessment methodologies, was the first to be affected by these closures. Due to this closure the students, teachers and parents are facing lots of problems. The entire teaching- learning process has been changed. The schools have newly adopted online teaching especially in rural areas. Children are missing opportunities for learning, lack of access to healthy meals in schools and are subject to economic and social stress.

Few immediate measures are required to be implemented to ensure continuity of learning in the educational institutions. Open-source digital learning solutions and Learning Management Software should be adopted so that teachers can conduct the classes online. The DIKSHA platform, E-Pathshala, National Repository of Open Educational Resources (NROER) are some digital initiatives of MHRD for secondary education. The same may be further strengthened to ensure accessibility of learning to the students. These online platforms to some extents have failed to satisfy the needs of children in rural areas. (Choudhury,2020) After shutting down all educational institutions as a preventative measure against COVID-19, the Assam government has instructed school teachers to impart lessons via WhatsApp. Officials of the state Education Department said the step was taken after an assessment that the pandemic dictated shutdown could lead to children dropping out of schools. Learning gaps also needed to be plugged, they said. The department on March 20 asked the teachers to provide “necessary learning support through phone-based learning material” (www.thehindu.com>other-states)

Review of Related Literature

Some of the most related literatures reviewed by the investigator are discussed below-

Choudhary (2020) conducted a study on “COVID-19 Pandemic: Impact and strategies for education sector in India”. The study tried to focus the impact of the pandemic on the education in general and higher education in particular. The findings reveal that the higher education sector in the country has been significantly disrupted which is a critical determinant of a country’s economic future.

Gonzalez, et al (2020) ‘Influence of COVID-19 confinement on students’ performance in higher.’ The study analyses the impact of COVID-19 confinement on the self-learning and performance of students in higher education. The findings reveal that there is a significant positive impact of the COVID-19 confinement on the students’ performance. Further, this effect is also significant in activities that did not change their format when performed after the confinement. On the basis of these findings, it may be concluded that COVID-19 confinement changed students’ learning strategies to a more continuous habit, improving their efficiency.

Jena (2020) 'Impact of Pandemic COVID-19 on Education in India' The paper tries to highlight the measures taken by the Govt. of India to provide continuous education across the country in different levels of education. Further, the positive and negative impacts of COVID-19 pandemic are discussed and workable suggestions are put forward to continue educational practices without hampering the academic journey of the youths.

Jain (2020) in an article highlighted the efforts of the state government of Maharashtra by developing e-learning content for students from both government and aided schools for grades I to IX. But due to poor economic background of the students, most of the benefits could not be enjoyed by the students.

Kapoor and Yadav (2020) conducted a study on how corona virus accentuates inequalities? From the study it may be understood that in India poor are the most vulnerable to the pandemic and its after affects. The access to education is more challenging for children belonging to poorer households. For majority of Indians, Digital learning is still a distant dream.

Sarma and Das (2020) conducted a study on the impact of COVID-19 and Inequalities in Education created due to Rural-Urban Divide and class position with special reference to Assam. The study tried to analyze the imbalances and inequalities due to unequal access to visual learning and online learning facilities in the rural areas. Students in the rural areas are worst affected and deprived of attending online classes due lack of electricity, no accessibility to internet and lack of technological knowhow. Socio-economic condition and source of livelihood of rural households are shaken due to the COVID-19 pandemic and it exerts negative impact on children's education.

Significance of the Study

Considering the literature review it has been found that very few studies have been conducted in this area. COVID-19 pandemic periods have affected the teaching, learning and evaluation process of the entire country. This pandemic condition highly affects the teaching –learning process in rural areas. Hence, the researchers were prompted to conduct a situational analysis in the rural secondary schools of Assam, India with special reference to Barkhetri block of Nalbari district.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were-

- To examine the present status of teaching, learning and evaluation in the secondary schools of Assam, India
- To find out the problems faced by the students while pursuing online classes in rural areas
- To find out the challenges faced by the teachers and parents during the pandemic period

Delimitation of the study: the present study is delimited to:

- The study is delimited to the Barkhetri Block, Nalbari district (Assam) only.
- Only Junior secondary school students and their parents and teachers have been considered sample for

the study.

Area of the Study

The Barkhetri Block of Nalbari district has been selected as the area of the present study. Nalbari is an administrative district in the state of Assam, India. The district headquarter is located in Nalbari. Barkhetri block is situated in a rural setting. The block has 124 villages and there are total 38037 families in Block. The Geographical Area covers 32473.43 sq. k.m., Total Nos. of G.P:12Nos and Total Nos. Of Govt. Offices: 38 Nos.(<http://nalbari.nic.in>)

Methodology

The methodology adopted in the study is described as follows-

Method

The study is based on Descriptive Survey method

Sources of Data

Both primary and secondary sources of data were collected. The primary sources include interview schedule for teachers, parents and students. Personal observation was also used to observe neighbors' children. The secondary data were collected from various published sources such as research journals, articles, books, newspapers, websites etc.

Tools –

Two sets of interview schedule for collecting data.

Population of the Study:

The population of the present study consists of 60 secondary schools including govt aided, newly provincialized, private schools, Sanskrit tols, venture schools, and KGBV of Barkhetri Block, Nalbari District of Assam. Further all the teachers, parents and students are regarded as population of the present study. (http://nalbari.nic.in/block/Barkhetri_Development_Block)

Sample of the Study

A sample of 6 schools, 2 govt. aided schools, 2 private schools and 2 newly provincialised schools were selected representing 10% of the population based on purposive sampling technique.

Operational Definitions

The terms used in the present study has been defined as follows:

Online Education

Online education is electronically supported learning that relies on the internet for teacher/

student interaction and distribution of class materials.

Government Schools

Government schools are those schools which are administered and managed by the state government or central government.

Private Schools

Private schools are those schools which are run individually or by some specific group of peoples.

Discussion and Findings

The data has been analyzed on the basis of the sequence of the objectives-

Objective 1: The status of teaching, learning and evaluation in the secondary schools of Assam.

Table: 1 Analysis and Interpretation of Data Related to Students

Particulars	Students studying in Government Schools	Students studying in Private Schools
Online classes started	From the month of April,2020 and last week of April, 2021	Last week of March, 2020 and April, 2021
Apps used for online teaching	WhatsApp, zoom, over phone etc	WhatsApp, Google meet, Google classroom, zoom etc
Duration of class	1 hour	1hour
Techniques of evaluation used	Home Assignment and sent question paper through WhatsApp.	Home assignment, open book test, oral test etc
Students interest for online teaching	50%	80%
Subjects preferred for online teaching	Assamese, English and Social science, Hindi.	Mathematics, English, Hindi, Social science
Subjects learned per day	Any two subjects	Three or four subjects

Source: observation and telephonic interview

From the study it has been found that in the rural area government schools have started online classes from the last week of April, 2020 and the same have been resumed in the last week of April, 2021 with the upsurge of CORONA virus across the State of Assam. In the private schools of the study area, the online classes were started in the last week of March, 2020 and the same have been resumed in the last week of April, 2021. Students of the government schools said that most of the teachers used WhatsApp for the online classes. But they suggest some online learning apps to utilize their free time. The students of the private schools' children used WhatsApp, Zoom meet for online learning. They also used DIKSHA and ByJu's app for self-learning purposes. Students of both the types of management said that the duration for online class was one hour. In the study it has been found that for the evaluation in rural areas school teachers gave some home assignment and sent question paper through WhatsApp. After 4/5 days the teacher can collect the photocopies of the answer's sheets through WhatsApp. In the private schools' teachers provided assignment through WhatsApp and collected the photos of the answer sheet through WhatsApp. Sometimes the teachers also made video calling for oral test. In the private schools, teachers organised zoom meeting for teaching purpose. It is also found that in the private schools' students are more interested for online teaching. 80% students said that online teaching is more interesting. But in the government schools only 50% students preferred online teaching and learning methods. Teaching of subjects like English, Assamese, Social science and Hindi were preferred in online teaching. But they faced difficulty to teach subjects like Mathematics, Science and English Grammar through online mode. The students of government schools said that they learned two subjects per day. In the private schools, children learned three to four subjects per day. The class routine has been prepared by teachers and in case of any changes, they were informed in advanced.

Table: 2 Analysis and Interpretation of Data Related to Teachers:

Particulars	Teachers working in Government Schools	Teachers working in Private Schools
Preferred for online teaching	60%	80%
Students' participation inonline teaching	70%	95%
No. of Classes conducted per day	2	3/4

Source: Telephonic interview

From the study it has been found that 60% teachers of government schools preferred online teaching whereas 80% teachers of private schools preferred online teaching. In the Government schools, 70% students were involved in online learning and 80% students of private schools actively participated in online learning. Here a gap has been found between government schools and private schools in the student participation in online learning. The government school teachers took two classes in a day in the

classes IX and X. But in the private schools, teachers were more involved as per their classes' routine.

Table: 3 Analysis and Interpretation of Data Related to Parents

Particulars	Parents having children studying in Government Schools		Parents having children studying in Private Schools	
	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)
Preferred for online teaching	20%	80%	40%	60%
Duration of time to used cell phone at home	6 to 8hours		6 to 10 hours	

Source: telephonic interview

From the study it has been found that the 20% of Parents having children studying in Government Schools preferred online teaching and 80% parents not preferred for online teaching because they faced lots of problems at this time of pandemic. In case of parents having children studying in Private Schools 40% preferred for online teaching and 60% parents said that they not preferred online teaching because online teaching not given importance of all round development of children's it also found that the in the name of online teaching students used cell phone six to ten hours at home.

Objective no: 2 To find out the problems faced by the students in practicing online classes in rural areas.

In the present study it has been found that there are lots of problems faced by the students in practicing online classes in rural areas. These problems are-

Lack of electricity: in the 21st century also in rural areas electricity supplies are not available for twenty-four hours. During the summers electricity supplies are very poor in the rural areas. Only 6to 8 hours of electricity is available. In some of the river banks electricity is disrupted for two to three days. Hence the students residing in the rural areas face difficulties in attending online classes.

Lack of internet accessibility: in the rural areas internet speed is very low. Students are face a lot of trouble to open and download their page from the WhatsApp. Sometimes internet facilities are disrupted for two or three days. Apart from that in some of the rural areas till now internet facilities are not available.

Unsuitable home environment: Another problem faced by the students is the unsuitable home environment for online teaching. They said that they and their siblings share the same room at home. Hence, during online classes they face disturbance from their siblings as no single room facility is available for them.

Lack of personal cell phone: Another problem is not owning personal cell phones by students.

They used their parents or elders cell phones at the time of online classes. But sometimes their parents and elders go outside of home and thus they missed their classes.

Difficulties in subject learned: From the enquiries it has been found that the teachers mainly use WhatsApp for online teaching. They sent learning materials and questions and answers through WhatsApp. But sometimes students cannot understand the topic clearly. They also said that they found difficulties in learning Mathematics, General science and English Grammar through WhatsApp. They find problem in clarifying their doubts

Difficulty in reading instruction to access internet: it is fact that in the rural areas children were more accustomed to mother tongue. When they were accessing internet for learning instruction, they could not understand the instruction clearly and unable to access internet facilities.

The above mentioned are some of the vital problems faced by the students in practicing online teaching.

Objective no: 3. Challenges faced by the teachers and parents during the pandemic period.

At the time of COVID-19 pandemic, teachers and parents faced different challenges. These are:

Challenges faced by the teacher:

Unexpected change in teaching method: Most of the teachers were not ready for this change both physically and mentally. They are habituated with traditional classroom environment i.e, face to face learning. Practicing online teaching and preparing themselves for adjusting to the new situation is a great challenge for them.

Using Smart phone: before COVID- 19 pandemic most of the senior teachers used simple mobile handsets (keypads) belonging to the rural areas. But during the pandemic time, they needed Smartphone for online teaching. To adjust with the technical knowhow of the smartphones within a short period and using the same for online teaching is a great hurdle for them.

Access of internet: in the online teaching teachers faced difficulty in using technological devices and accessing internet. Most of the teachers don't know how to use Smartphone or use of the various apps. They have experience of classroom teaching and sound knowledge of subject matters. But they fail to express themselves or application of knowledge through digital mode.

Economic problem: in the study it has been found that many teachers working in the private schools are facing financial crisis. Due to lockdown, parents were not able to pay the school fees. Thus, the private school authorities fail to pay the full salary. Due to COVID-19 pandemic their private tuitions are also temporarily suspended. In this crucial period meeting the daily expenses is a great challenge for them.

Lack of conducive environment: creating a suitable and conducive teaching environment at

home is a great challenge for the teachers. For better teaching a suitable environment is vital. School is a

place where everyone played their role with motivation. But during this pandemic condition both teachers and students are de- motivated due to lack of supportive environment.

Challenges Faced by the Parents

Changed Daily Routine of the Children: COVID-19 pandemic period

Has changed the previous routine life of children and parents. Children are now at home for 24 hours and maximum numbers of students wants to live their live like celebrating holidays. For these reasons parents are facing problem in adjusting with the new routine keeping children's' education on the track while they are staying at home.

Lack of technical knowledge: From the present study it has been found that maximum numbers of parents are not technologically smart and advance. As such they face problem in accessing internet uploading and downloading homework.

Arranging facility of Smartphone for children: Availability of smartphone or computer is an urgent requirement for children's education. But due to lockdown some parents lost their job and find it very hard to arrange a Smartphone for their children.

Cost of accessing internet: cost of accessing the internet facility is another issue for some parents. During this pandemic period some parents are struggling hard to run their families and fulfil their basics needs. But due to high cost of net packs, accessing internet for online classes is a challenge for many households.

Excessive use of Smartphone: another important challenge faced by the parents is excessive use of smart phones. On the name online teaching maximum children spent 8 to 10 hours in smart phones. But their online classes were only for two or three hours. They are highly addicted to playing video games in internet and spending lots of time in the digital world.

Major Findings of the Study

The major findings of the study are discussed in the following manners:

- In the present study it has been found that 50% student respondents of government schools preferred online teaching classes whereas 80% student respondents of private schools preferred online classes.
- There exists digital divide between students studying in government schools as compared to students studying in private schools in rural Areas.
- In the rural areas only 70% students of government schools involved in online teaching and 95% students of private schools involved in online teaching. Other students are deprived from online teaching because of so many reasons. Like lack of internet facilities, electricity issues, not single smart pone at home etc.
- Another important problem found in online teaching is that all the subjects were not equally focused while teaching. Subjects like Mathematics, General science and English grammar, students said that they cannot learn well through online mode.
- In the rural areas both children and teachers are not well trained in practicing online teaching. It is a

great challenge for them to prepare themselves for online teaching within a short period of time.

- In the online teaching teachers faced evaluation problem. Because in the rural areas WhatsApp is mainly used for online teaching. And through WhatsApp continuous comprehensive evaluation is not possible.
- Majority of the parents (80%) of the government schools do not prefer online teaching, only (20%) preferred online teaching. Among the parents of private schools (40%) preferred online classes whereas (60%) parents do not prefer online teaching.
- Maximum students used smart phones for 8 to 10 hours per day in the name of online teaching. They play games, videos etc. which may have harmful effect on their physical and mental health in the long run.
- In the rural areas proper infrastructure facilities are not available for online teaching. There are a number of issues related to online teaching.
- In the rural areas both students and teachers are not well trained. They are both mentally and physically not ready for digital learning.

Recommendations

The recommendations of the study are as follows-

- Proper planning is the urgent need of the hour for online teaching. With the help of proper planning and training of the teacher's digital gap and lack of technical knowhow may be managed.
- Online teaching required skilled manpower. But the rural populace is not well trained in this regard. Effort should be taken for both teachers and students through well trained personnel.
- Uninterrupted internet facilities and should be made available in all the areas which is important for digital learning.
- Creating awareness is important for digital learning. In the rural areas there are so many parents and children who are unaware of the advantages of digital learning and different learning apps.
- Both teachers and students should be mentally ready for online teaching in the new normal situation.
- There should be a sound policy for developing online teaching learning platform instead of traditional classroom teaching –learning process in Assam.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic forced all educational institutions to close down, impacting an unprecedented number of learners worldwide. Educators irrespective of their position have an important role to play during this challenging phase of human race. COVID-19 pandemic has changed the entire scenario of the education system. In this crucial time, it is a great challenge to keep children's education on the track. The traditional classroom teaching learning methods has been changed to digital learning. But in India digital learning may not be fully successful. In some of the rural areas there are so many technical issues related to digital learning. With the help of proper planning and policy making these issues should be minimized within a short period of time so that the challenges may be converted to strength.

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