Challenges and Responses of India's Education Sector during COVID – 19 – An Explorative Study

Dr. Siddharth Kanojia
Assistant Professor, Jindal School of Business & Finance, O.P Jindal Global University

Abstract

COVID-19, potentially the world's inordinate pandemic has triggered an economic catastrophe that was likely to be more severe and widespread than ever before. The global impact of COVID-19 has been both unexpected and substantial, while entailing enduring implications on all sectors with the most vulnerable sectors such as 'Education' being indecorously affected. Since a few years ago, the challenge of absorbing the crisis' lessons and reducing its effects on education has been ongoing. In order to maintain learning continuity when schools were closed, education delivery has dramatically altered through distant education and thereafter, the digital, blended, or hybrid learning have all emerged as a component of today's learning reality. Accordingly, this paper attempts to infer the response of India's education sector to the unprecedented aftermath of COVID-19. It intends to examine the immediate aftermath of closures and re-openings of schools, identifying the prime repercussions on pupil, their learning abilities, mental health, families, and entire system of education and thereby, deliberating on the paradigms to the competency-based approaches which will be far more malleable, offer better response to children's holistic needs and aspirations and creating an opportunity for life-long learning. Thereby, aligning the policies of the education sector with the agenda 4 of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Keywords: *Education Sector, Impact of Pandemic, Sustainable Development Goals, Reformation*

Introduction :-

India reported its first positive case of Covid-19 in late January, 2020 and thereafter, Government of India announced an implementation of complete lockdown on March 24, 2020 in order to cease the extensive dissemination of the Coronavirus. This sudden announcement directly impacted every citizen of the country and specially the lakhs of low-paid labourers and workers who used on work on daily wages. Although, as a result of the economic downturn that followed the nationwide lockdown for public-health, there were more incidents than ever before. The lockdown was imposed until mid of 2021 and was then progressively lifted. In addition to the lockdown, the government has implemented enforced compliance of quarantines and travel restrictions since early January of the same year and issued stringent advisory for foreign travel while launching a massive awareness campaigns on cleanliness and social segregation.

Since the commencement of the first lockdown in March 2020, majority of schools and educational institutions were compelled to remain temporarily shuttered. Consequently, The closures have had a significant negative impact on millions of children in pre-primary through secondary schools. This change from in-person to online learning has exposed the considerable differences across state educational systems. The apparent disparities which caught the attention of the stakeholder are in the inability of instructors/teachers/professors, the impact of online

teaching and learning, lack of digital access and infrastructure, and access to internet and mobile devices. There is lack of research and primary data on the quantum of information reached to the students digitally and whether that information was engaging, and its immediate effect on the comprehending abilities of the pupil. An Alternative Academic Calendar report issued by MHRD in April 2020 has presupposed that all Indian states have ensured the creation of digital ecosystems in order to provide an easy access of the internet and smart mobile devices for all instructors and their pupils. On the other hand, Only 11% of families had computers, such as desktops, laptops, and tablets, according to a 2019 poll. Only 32% of persons over 12 in rural regions and 54% of those residing in the metropolitan and semi-metropolitan areas had access to the internet.

According to a status report on the functioning of the schools during the pandemic, students attending government schools in the state of Uttar Pradesh, , Bihar, Odisha, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh were particularly heavily impacted during the closure of the schools during lockdown with more than 81% of students of government school were denied access to any instructional materials throughout the lockdown. According to this report, In both public and private schools, WhatsApp was the most popular method of providing teaching to students whose families had internet connection, followed by teacher phone calls. However, because of a unavailability of high-bandwidth internet connection, an inability to pay for such connections, a slow broadband connection, or a weak internet signal, more than 75% of parents had difficulty guaranteeing smooth accessibility. Moreover, various children who earlier faced obstacles in getting an education such as students with impairments, residing in remote areas, kids of migrant & daily-wage workers, immigrants, and asylum seekers—have had minimal or no schooling as a result of this lockdown due to COVID-19. This may drive many kids to give up on their education even when "normalcy" has been restored.

Challenges faced during COVID-19

Teaching – Learning Process

According to a number of exploratory researches only few teachers have a prior experience in delivering high quality lectures through a hybrid approach employing digital tools and online platforms. This resulted in even greater learning differences between students and teachers with higher skill-set and those with lower skill-set. Further, It was contented by the community of the teachers that the government's support was insufficient. They were not given the digital tools they required to continue teaching remotely (cell phones, computers, dependable internet access, etc.), and they did not get instructions on how to helm and navigate the condensed information on e-learning platforms such as DIKSHA. Thus, with teachers faced trouble in reaching all of their students because of the issues related to their capacity and limited or unavailability to devices of modern technologies, especially those in distant locations. The ability of teachers is one of the key issues facing nations as they progress toward employing technology to supplement and enhance the classroom teaching and learning or possibly provide a substitute to in-person teaching.

Health

In more than 1.26 million schools across India, 120 million kids are enrolled in the noon meal programme. 8 Many kids see this meal as a significant incentive to go to school, but lockdowns and COVID-19-related interruptions have made it impossible for many states and union territories to implement the programme, depriving kids from the most nourishing meal of the day. Additionally, the schools & education institutions frequently provide amenities like feminine hygiene items. Given the significant obstacles teenage girls must overcome in order to maintain even the most basic menstrual hygiene, these services are necessary. Menstruation taboos, especially in rural India, promote censorship, limit girls' mobility, raise fears pertaining to sexual abuse, result in child-marriages, and pose major hazards to their health. With the end of this programme, the challenges faced by young girls due to school closures have gotten worse.

Violence

The state-wide lockdown allegedly also led to an upsurge in violence against women, children, and sexual minorities as well as violence against women based on gender. The risk of gender-based violence is enhanced by physical separation, movement constraints, infection fear, and confinement at home, as well as by rising tensions and economic stress, particularly in situations when the risk is already high. The number of allegations of violence against women and girls increased more than double in the week after the lockdown, according to the National Commission for Women. Besides, nearly 30% of the contacts to Childline India Helpline were from people looking for safety against child abuse and violence.

Social Security

The Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana, which aimed to provide a combination of financial and non-financial social help to protect poor and vulnerable households, is a remarkable example of how the government has boosted social support. Even before the commencement of the COVID-19, Less than 40% of the eligible mothers received the privileges of maternity benefits under the Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana, despite the fact that India's social security programmes cover significant life phases (PMMVY). Additionally, most of India's employment is unorganised and unprotected by social security. The COVID-19 epidemic brought to light the structural issues with India's system of social system, which is disjointed and mostly carried out via intricate state funded initiatives. Investing in integrated social protection can assist individuals manage shocks and other risks, as well as multidimensional vulnerabilities.

Responses to the Challenges

The government has made a variety of step & initiatives to mitigate the negative consequences of COVID-19 on the education sector. The system swiftly adjusted to distance learning, teachers worked hard to shift with their jobs, and communities and parents united to support children's education. In India's educational system, there were several ways to assist kids during the COVID-19 lockdown. Additionally, there were essential remote-learning solutions

and learning facilitating solutions (such as midday meals, hygienic supplies, and financial help). The Ministry of Education has also put a lot of effort into creating a library of instructional resources and carrying out EdTech initiatives to increase access to digital learning (in collaboration with NGOs). The National Repository of Open Educational Resources, e-Pathshala, Swayam, and the Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing (DIKSHA) are important government e-learning platforms. The state governments are responsible for implementing the policies and rules of the federal government. As a result, COVID-19 responses vary by state, and learning continuity solutions are customised to meet local needs. In essence, While Gujarat focused on distributing textbooks with QR codes, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh focused on TV learning programmes, Kerala focused on textbook distribution and WhatsApp groups, while Assam offered worksheets with midday meals. While, Odisha has turned to radio since online courses couldn't reach all students due to insufficient cell-phone connectivity. The Ministry of Home Affairs Order of September 202023 allowed States to begin a phased school reopening on October 15 with the exclusion of detention zones. The choice to reopen or not is down to the state governments. Even while taking into account the local environment is important when making decisions, research suggests that children in India experienced returning to school differently depending on where they lived, expanding the achievement gap within and across states. Thereafter, the National Education Policy (NEP) issued by the Ministry of Education was authorised by the Union Cabinet in July 2020. As India recovers from the epidemic, the Policy offers the government a number of opportunities to create a more comprehensive and resilient education system. The expansive NEP 2020 plan calls for a complete reformation of the education sector. The projected allocation of almost 6% of India's cumulative GDP to the sector demonstrates that the government is fully dedicated to achieve its goal.

Initiatives for solidifying the infrastructure

Solutions to let students continue their study while the lockdown was in effect have snowballed during the last six months. This includes crucial online learning resources (such as traditional ones like textbooks and home visits, tech-enabled ones like WhatsApp, YouTube, TV, and radio, and blended ones that combine in-person and online learning), as well as learning-enabling technologies. To promote continuing education while schools are closed, the Ministry of Education released a list of several free digital e-learning portals in a press release on March 21, 2020. The government has put a lot of effort into creating a collection of educational resources and has started using EdTech in partnership with a number of NGOs, such as EkStep, Khan Academy, and the Azim Premji Foundation. Use the following resources without charge.

Additionally, students and teachers can use an open-source national platform called Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing (DIKSHA) that promotes independence in learning. Furthermore, Students have access to more than 80,000 e-books in multiple languages, including textbooks for every grade level; the material facilitates homework and test preparation through the use of question banks. While, the platform's training materials and resources for lesson planning, explaining topics to students, and student evaluation are all available to

teachers. In addition to this, a QR code on textbooks can be used to obtain the information. The National Council for Education Research and Training (NCERT) has launched the e-Pathshaala programme, which features 504 Flip Books, 696 e-books (ePubs), 1,886 audio files, and 2,000 videos available for students in grades 1 through 12. Besides this, More than 2000 courses are available through Swayam, a national online education network, for both K–12 and higher education i.e., relating to undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in almost every contemporary field. One of SWAYAM's distinguishing characteristics is the way it is integrated into conventional education. Last but not least, The Swayam Prabha project features 32 D2H TV stations that continuously broadcast educational programming. Every citizen of the country is able to view these channels on Doordarshan, the government-run national television channel, using a free dish, set-top box, and antenna. The website includes other information as well as the channel schedules.

Conclusion :-

Lastly, it can be profoundly stated that the Government of India and State Governments has put up a symbiotic efforts to resolve the problems caused by the COVID-19 epidemic. The world's largest vaccination rollout programme is currently being carried out in India, which leads the world in vaccine manufacturing as the rest of the world struggles to find the most efficient method. In the midst of the pandemic i.e., year 2020, the government unveiled the National Education Policy, and it is committed to improving its educational options and reaching SDG 4 goals. Since no one could predict the virus's potential impact on human-health, and the rates of its spread & community transmission, there have been substantial challenges. Adopting a decentralised strategy makes sense in a nation with such a dense population and a decentralised structure. Many states have developed methods that other governments may use. Digitalization is emphasised in both the COVID-19 response and the NEP as a means of enhancing access to top-notch & high-quality education. However, there are a lot of obstacles to overcome, and there are a lot of reasons why it should just be a part of the solution. In addition to educating students intellectually, schools also serve a variety of other functions. These include the potential for the digital divide to increase gaps in access to high-quality education and the pricey cost of making sure that every student has access to digital resources.

References :-

COVID-19 Crisis Will Push Millions of Vulnerable Children into Child Labour (thewire.in), accessed October 2022.

Government of India, Ministry of Labour & Employment, Employment in Informal Sector and Conditions of Informal Employment Volume IV

JHU CSSE COVID-19 Data/India, accessed on 30 January 2021

Nielsen & Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), Digital in India: 2019 – Round 2 Report. https://cms.iamai. in/Content/ResearchPapers/2286f4d7-424f-4bde-be88-6415fe5021d5.pdf

Now Odisha turns to radio for classes - The Hindu, accessed January 2021.

Oxfam India, Status Report: Government and Private Schools During COVID-19, 4 September 2020. 1,158 parents across private and government schools and 488 government schoolteachers across five states – Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, and Uttar Pradesh participated in the Oxfam India study.

UN India, COVID-19: Immediate Socio-Economic Response Plan, May 2020

UNICEF, Rapid Assessment of Learning During School Closure in the Context of COVID-19, October 2020

Upadhyay, A., M. Uphadhyay and P. Bhide (2020), COVID-19 pandemic: Implications of School Closures on Children in India.

How to cite reference of this paper-

Kanojia, S. (2022). Challenges and responses of India's education sector during COVID – 19 – an explorative study. *Educational Metamorphosis, 1*(2), 22-27.