

Mocking Inclusivity

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Abstract

The current pandemic has hit the world hard. Every aspect of life has been affected and everyone is still struggling to get back to the old normal. While authorities have tried their best to ensure that everyone gets equal educational opportunities, the factual reality is that a large number of learners have been excluded from teaching-learning processes because of varied reasons. It has been assumed the learners are well-equipped with the various essential requirements of attending online classes including the possession of a smart device that can enable them to access online classes, varied accessories such as earphones, a reliable internet connection, regular electricity supply, a suitable environment to ensure learning, etc. But are these actually available to all the learners keeping in mind the diverse population of India? There is a need to look at the issue of inclusivity in context of diversities existing in India. This article seeks to explore more such experiences where the rights of the learners have not been catered.

Keywords: *inclusion, COVID-19, online classes, migrant labour, learners, education, examinations*

Introduction

The year 2020 has brought huge challenges for all people and governments of the world as the world has been hit by COVID-19. The struggle to create a vaccine effective enough to enhance human beings' ability to survive and fight against COVID-19 is still going on. Various countries and governments are trying out different methods to control the spread of the virus. For instance, enforcing lockdown allows accessibility to essentials only. This changed the lives of everyone. While some gradually shifted their livelihood to online mode, thanks to the presence of digital equipment and the technological advancement of the 21st century, some lost their occupation entirely.

The greatest challenge

The availability of various resources is significant for the primary inclusion of the learners in the teaching-learning processes. India, being a developing country, is continuously struggles with the issue of poverty. In fact, every fourth person in India is poor. This means, roughly 270 million (or 27 crore) people in India live in poverty 2011-12. (Economics textbook NCERT, 2019)

People who are economically disadvantaged form the most vulnerable, and their vulnerability got manifoldly increased during the period of lockdown. The countrywide lockdown led to loss

of jobs, people were unable to pay their rents or buy food.

Though a sector which is seen as recession free got majorly hit by COVID-19 and that is 'Education'

Compulsory education

"The Constitution (Eighty-sixth Amendment) Act, 2002 inserted Article 21-A in the Constitution of India to provide free and compulsory education of all children in the age group of six to fourteen years as a Fundamental Right in such a manner as the State may, by law, determine. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009, which represents the consequential legislation envisaged under Article 21-A, means that every child has a right to full time elementary education of satisfactory and equitable quality in a formal school which satisfies certain essential norms and standards." ("Ministry of Education, Government of India," n.d.)

In India, education is a fundamental right. To prevent the outstretch of the COVID-19, schools have to be closed since mid of March 2020. In order to continue the process of education, all the schools shifted their classes to the various available virtual platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, etc. But are online classes accessible and available to all the diverse learners of India? This question needs an answer, it is important to understand the

prerequisites for attending the online classes, to participate in the teaching-learning process and learn virtually.

All the software programs and applications that provide face to face virtual calling facilities have some minimum requirements that include an electronic device such as a computer/ laptop/ smartphone/ tablet, consistent electricity supply, and a working internet connection. The availability of these equipment is only sufficient to ensure the attendance of a learner and there are few more requirements to really enable a learner to participate and learn in the online classes. These are majorly related to the environment of the learner. For learning, a space without any external disturbance plays a major role and as the learners have been asked to attend the classes from their home, there is a need for a comfortable space with ample and without any external disturbances. This leads to the need for a specific place unaffected from household chores and activities of other members of the house for the learner in order to participate and learn through online mode of education. Also, if one believes that by only organizing online classes everyone would get included in the educational processes then the concept of inclusion behind this thinking is indeed vague.

Intersecting poverty and education

Urban areas like Delhi, the capital of India, invite an immensely large population as they provide pull factors in the form of jobs and education. The countrywide lockdown started a wave of insecurities among all the migrants. While the people who migrated for jobs, no longer had jobs nor the hope of getting their jobs back anytime soon, the learner who migrated for education, especially those who were enrolled in higher educational institutions, were facing the same uncertainty as schools and colleges were closed for an uncertain period of time. "Coronavirus In Delhi: Delhi Shuts Schools, Colleges, Cinema Halls to Counter Coronavirus - The Economic Times," 2020; Haryana Schools Closed, 2020)

The migrant workers faced yet another challenge even with the best of their abilities, they were not able to get a place to stay or arrange transport to go back to their native village/ town. What about the learners who migrated for the purpose of education? Every year thousands of

learners migrate to big cities for better educational opportunities. Most of them either resided in hostels provided by the universities or rented rooms offered by the individual owners. Most of the students were in the middle of their session when the complete lockdown was announced. All of a sudden, students found themselves stuck at a place that they can't call their homes. The only motive for them to stay was to attend classes. At present all the institutions were asked to close down, so classes came to a stall. What were they doing by staying in the hostels and Paying Guest rooms? They were not only living with uncertainties and insecurities but were also feeling futile to be where they were.

Learners who were residing in hostels went in despair when many of the institutions asked their hostel residents to vacate the hostels as soon as possible. ("Delhi University hostel asks students to vacate within a week," 2020; Fatima Khan, 2020; "Punjab University asks students to vacate hostels amid mounting COVID cases on campus," 2020) Many of the hostels' mess stopped working and learners were asked to become self-reliant and thus were left with nothing but to manage their meals on their own in a time when they were having a lack of availability of necessary equipment required for preparing food and even the shops that would provide the similar stuff were closed. At the same time, they were also supposed to leave for their hometowns using the scarce mode of transportation available during that time that included few overcrowded buses, or aeroplanes that were overcharging. Thus, the learners were left with the choice of either travelling through the buses, avoiding the social distancing measures and taking the risk of catching coronavirus or purchasing a flight ticket costing almost double the charges that were being taken during the time period before the attack of coronavirus. Which option do you think a learner would have opted for who does not belong to a well-off family? What about those who somehow managed to gather the money required for travelling through the air mode but faced a lot of hardship because of that as they gave prime importance to their health and not to their pocket? Simultaneously, the universities also resumed their classes using an online mode of education. Hence, a learner who was worried about how s/he would manage his/her next meal, a learner who was uncertain about his/her stay

and could be asked anytime to vacate the place s/he was residing at, a learner who was struggling to get back to his/her home was supposed to attend, focus and learn through virtual classes. The whole idea of inclusion seems to be getting misted here.

Nevertheless, the classes were soon resumed in all educational institutions including schools and colleges using the online mode of learning and life appeared to be back on track again but for many, it was the beginning of new challenges including those who were not migrants but natives. Let us take an example to understand this.

A family of six, living in a small house in an urban city, has four children. Out of these four children, two are too young to attend the school, and the other two study in standard five and three respectively. Both of the older children have classes during the same hours of the day, but they have access to only one smart device that is sufficient to enable only one of them to attend the online class. As a result of this, they attend only half of the classes meant for them as they share the same device. Their father, a small-scale businessman indulges in the house construction business, is unemployed as his work has been hampered significantly due to the current scenario where the economy is continuously declining. Their mother is a housewife who takes care of the two younger children. While both of the older children miss half of their specific classes, they find it really difficult to concentrate in the remaining classes because of the regular chaos in the house. Meanwhile, the school is moving further with the syllabus and these children are lagging behind.

There were countless such experiences and the situation where lack of resources added to physical and mental stress.

Examinations

Till now the coronavirus has succeeded in stalling almost everything but not the

examinations. Be it a school or a college, many of the institutions were able to find out one way or another to conduct examinations for their learners. While some organized open book examinations for the learners, some took the help of the various online applications providing the facilities of conducting multiple-choice quizzes, and some were asked to keep the camera of their device open, answer all the questions on sheets of paper in the virtual presence of an invigilator, scan the answers and send them to the teachers through various supporting applications. (Fareeha Iftikhar, 2020; Schools put to test as they gear up for 1st online exam - Times of India, 2020) This way, even the learners who had been quarantined inside their home because one of their family members had been found positive with COVID-19 or even if they were themselves suffering from the same life-threatening disease, had no choice but to give the examinations for the sake of one crucial year of their lives. Their inclusion, keeping their circumstances in mind, was nowhere.

Conclusion

We are living in a time where learners are supposedly assumed as responsible for making themselves included in the educational processes. Multifarious and immense challenges have been faced, since the spread of the world pandemic COVID-19. These circumstances have made them vulnerable and insecure physically, mentally and emotionally. While some have struggled to reach out their houses, some suffered with the issue of the absence of resources. For some, even the presence of the bare minimum amount of food had been a luxury. The situation was worse for the learners who came from the lowest rung of the society. Nevertheless, the various institutions were moving forward with their classes, covering their syllabuses, and were conducting examinations to assess the learners. The way in which the concept of inclusion has been mocked was indeed a mocking in itself.

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