Impact of COVID-19 on Students from Different Socioeconomic Groups in India

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Abstract:
The COVID-19 pandemic caused the greatest disruption known in recent history to the education system. The pandemic caused the traditional in-person classes to come to a halt and sequestered about 1.2 billion students worldwide in their respective homes. These circumstances brought about an extraordinary collaboration among all stakeholders to shift the process of teaching, conducting examinations, and everything in between to an online mode using innovative ways. A literature review has been done in this empirical paper to understand the known and researched effects of the pandemic enforced online learning on students. It is noted that this unprecedented situation has made students face several problems and caused a loss of learning, but it is also pointed out that the lockdown has given educational institutions an incentive to grow technologically and embrace new-age methods of teaching and learning. In the light of these observations, it can be said that it is already established that the pandemic has brought some negatives and some positives to the field of education. This research paper aims to study how these negatives and positives have been distributed among learners from separate socioeconomic groups by attempting to gauge the effect of e-learning and the shutdown of academic institutions on students from different socioeconomic backgrounds. For this purpose, student respondents from all over India were asked to fill in a structured questionnaire and statistical analysis was then performed on the data from this survey to infer the results that have been presented. Lastly, this paper also shares examples and suggestions that may be used to equitably impart education in distance mode, especially during unusual times like these.

Keywords: COVID-19, lockdown, educational institutions, online learning, distance learning, students, socioeconomic groups

I.INTRODUCTION

The entire human society was shaken by the spread of 2019 novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) or the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), a virus that originated in bats and was transmitted to humans through yet unknown intermediaries in Wuhan, China, as first discoveredon December 31, 2019. The virus was quick to spread through different countries and continents of our contemporary interconnected world. The response to COVID-19 was as swift as its spread, it was declared as a pandemic by World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020, and we soon entered a global lockdown.

The first case of the COVID-19 pandemic was reported on 30 January 2020 in the state of Kerala and the infected individual had a travel history from Wuhan, China. The first death due to COVID-19 was reported in India on March 12, 2020. Eventually, the first phase of a nationwide lockdown in India was announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on March 25, 2020. As the Indian Government monitored the effects of the virus, the lockdown was extended and tweaked in its restrictions over almost two years. The educational institutions, during this time, barely got any relaxation to resume their educational activities.

As COVID-19 spread around the world, prompt steps were taken by states to minimize infections. Businesses opted to function through online modes and platforms, citizens retreated to their homes and ventured out of their homes onlyif necessary, all infrastructure work came to a halt, educational institutions were forced to discontinue in-person classes; in short, life came to a standstill. The cooperation and patience from the people regardingthis lockdown were driven by the optimistic belief that this situation would be over within a month or two. But as months went by, it became clear that thepandemic and its consequences werenot going to depart from our lives any time soon.

According to the UNESCO report, the pandemic had affected more than 90% of the total world's student population during mid-April 2020 which was later reduced to nearly 67% during June 2020. The outbreak of COVID-19 has affected around 120 crores of students and youths across the world. In India, more than 32 crores of students have been impacted by the various restrictions taken to curb the spread of COVID-19. The COVID-

19 lockdowns came up roughly in the middle of college semesters and the beginning of school years. With limited planning and preparation, educational institutions rushed to bring the teaching-learning processes online.

The lockdown caused all the schools and colleges to cancel classes, examinations, internships, and all related activities. In a matter of a few weeks, the COVID-19 pandemic forced upon the education sector a new perspective, and online teaching went from being an optional good-to-have option to the only possible way to carry out academic activities. Now after two years, as academic institutions sluggishly re-open, experts in academia have published much useful literature covering the general loss of learning brought about by education suddenly exclusively going online, the incentive provided by the lockdown to digitize education, and the steps taken by authorities around the world to minimize the adverse effects of the lockdown on students.

Even though the country has been adapting to the new-age digital learning in the face of the pandemic, there lies an obstacle in achieving success due to the limitations of the existing facilities and infrastructure. Only 45 crore people of the Indian population have access to the internet/e-learning. The people residing in rural areas, people from lower-income groups, and people from scheduled are still very much deprived of the technologies needed for online education. This inaccessibility might be the greatest impediment that hampers the cause of online education. This paper aims to fill the gap in the existing literature by discussing the impact of COVID-19 induced lockdown on students belonging to different socioeconomic groups in India. It is hypothesized that the pandemic-related restrictions have had different effects on students from different socioeconomic groups. To research whether this hypothesis is true or not, data collected from students across India through a questionnaire is studied.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Starting March 25, 2020, in India, the COVID-19 pandemic compelled a nationwide lockdown that brought about a stressful situation for the entire education sector as traditional offline classes came to a halt.Despite the hope that this situation would be resolved in a few weeks, the lockdown dragged on and left the educational institutions scrambling to make do with distance modes of learning.In fact, according to a UNESCO report, India has had the longest duration of COVID-19 induced school closure (82 weeks) in the world, with the status of educational institutions still remaining only "partially open".

The primary aim was to continue with educational activities and e-learning modes were widely adopted to do so. The main challenges to doing this were accessibility, affordability, and flexibility. The advent and development of the internet and technology have made it a much simpler task to deliver education without in-person meetings. However, only a limited part (23%) of the Indian population has access to internet services.Not only that, the Ministry of Rural Development found in a 2018 survey that only 47% of Indian households receive more than 12 hours of electricity and more than 36% of schools in India operate without electricity. This increased the rate of absenteeism in schools and HEIs and caused students from underprivileged and underserved backgrounds to lose out on education. In underdeveloped and rural areas, even the students who could afford a computerdevice and an internet connection faced difficulties in attending classes due to the poor network and shaky electricity supply in their area.

The lockdown has had an adverse effect on the examination system as internal exams were conducted in online mode only for all students at all levels. Students are more likely to use unfair means in online examinations due to limited invigilation and thus the results of such examinations are not honestly telling of a student'sperformance and cannot be used to gauge student learning. The 2021 board exams were canceled in India owing to thecoronavirus situation and students passed secondary or senior secondaryschool with certificates bearing marks from previous internal assessments. These certificates that the students earned without a fair chance at attempting final examinations may affect their employment and university admission prospects in the future. Other than this, several exams for government job vacancies were postponed or canceled as well during this time, creating panic and anxiety among aspirants.

Several students and teachers, especially middle and old-aged teachers, faced difficulty in switching to the online mode of learning and teaching as many of them did not have much prior experience with distance education and were not digitally literate enough to quickly adapt to it. The lack of any social interaction has been studied to have harmed the students' mental health. Catering to special needs students also became close to impossible in the virtual learning setup.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching consequences for students in India, with the effects varying significantly by socioeconomic status. School closures, which affected nearly 68% of the world's students (Jena, 2020), led to a rapid shift to online learning. However, this transition highlighted existing inequalities in access to technology, with at least 43% of students lacking access to online classes for up to 19 months after schools closed (Dreze et al., 2021).

The pandemic has disproportionately impacted students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, leading to a more than tripling of the dropout rate, from 1.8% in 2018 to 5.3% in 2020 (ASER, 2022). This trend is largely attributed to the lack of access to reliable internet and devices necessary for online learning, exacerbating existing educational inequalities (CBGA, 2020).

The prolonged school closures and disruption to education have also had psychosocial impacts on students. Chouksey and Agrawal (2021) found a high prevalence of self-reported anxiety, depression, and fear of COVID-19 among college students in India. The uncertainty and stress caused by the pandemic have contributed to these negative mental health outcomes.
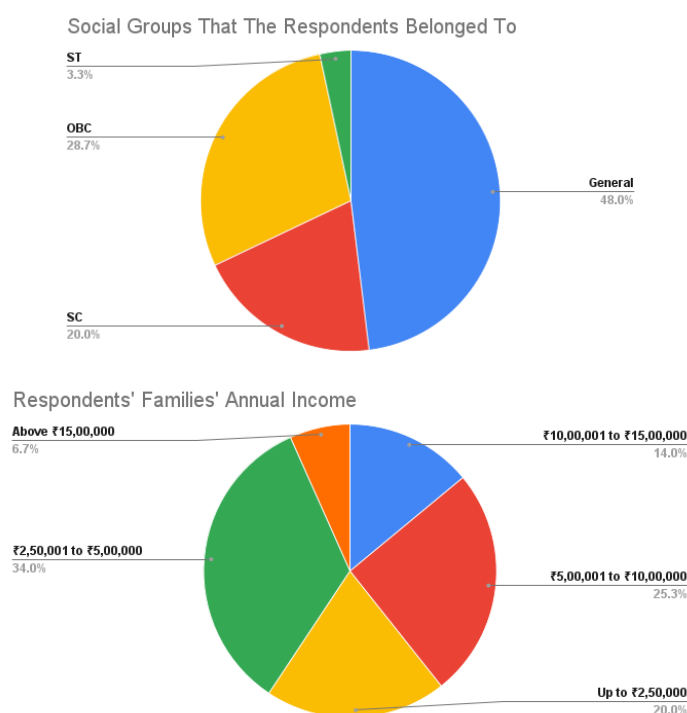
Academically, the long gap between in-person instruction and exams has negatively impacted students' final performance (Gupta & Goplani, 2020). Furthermore, the pandemic has affected employment opportunities for students, with many recruitments postponed (Jena, 2020).

The Indian government and educational institutions have taken steps to mitigate these impacts, including implementing remote learning solutions and providing support for students' mental health (Tarkar, 2020). However, addressing the long-term effects of the pandemic on India's education system will require sustained efforts to ensure equitable access to quality education for all students.

A handful of positive effects of the pandemic on the education sector also have been illustrated in current research. A major positive impact of the sudden shift to online learning is that it has improved digital literacy among people and increased the use of Learning Management Systems (LMS) by academic institutions. These developments are expected to accelerate the digitization of education and open doors to more innovative methods to deliver quality education irrespective of the distance between the educator and the learner. Adoption of a blended mode of learning may make education more affordable and also encourage students to self-learn and upskill via Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). Another benefit of online classes is that it has given students more time to self-study andaccommodate other activities into their schedules by saving the time spent on commute.

III.RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study area was randomly distributed across the country. An online questionnaire made using Google Forms was deployed using means such as mail, WhatsApp, Instagram, et cetera to gather responses, and a total of 150 responses were analyzed. To reach out to students from underprivileged backgrounds, a mobile phone was carried to a nearby low-income neighborhood and the questionnairewasfilled out on the basis ofverbal inputs provided by the students there. Long answer-type responses by some respondents on their experience with studying during the lockdown and some field interviews have also been employed in interpreting the results of the data collection.

Social Groups That The Respondents Belonged To

ST 3.3%
OBC 28.7%
General 48.0%
SC 20.0%

Respondents' Families' Annual Income

Above ₹15,00,000 6.7%
₹10,00,001 to ₹15,00,000 14.0%
₹2,50,001 to ₹5,00,000 34.0%
₹5,00,001 to ₹10,00,000 25.3%
Up to ₹2,50,000 20.0%

IV.FINDINGS

The sampled population has been divided into different categories: 64.7% of the repondents belong to the 18-21 years old age group, meaning they are typically undergraduate students. 27.3% students are aged under 18, meaning they are school-goers and 8% are graduate students aged over 21 years.

41.3% of respondents were female, 53.3% were male, and the rest belonged to other gender identities or they preferred not to reveal their gender.

The sample population is comprised of 66% Hindus, 16% Muslims, 12% Christians and the rest of the students identified as Buddhists, Sikhs, atheists, et cetera. The distribution of respondents among different social categories is asdiverse, with 48% general category students, 28.7% OBCs, 20% students belonging to scheduled castes and 3.3% belonging to scheduled tribes.

The survey also required the respondents to give information about their families' annual incomes. The categories were divided on the basis of standard annual income slabs used by the government to determine income tax. The results have been as follows: 20% students were from low-income families earning up to Rs. 2,50,000 ($3278) annually, 34% in the Rs. 2,50,001-5,00,000 ($3278-6555) bracket, 25.3% in the Rs. 5,00,001-10,00,000 ($6555-13110) bracket, 14% in the Rs. 10,00,001-15,00,000 ($13110-19665) bracket and 6.7% from high income families making more than Rs. 15,00,000 ($19665) annually.

With simple analysis, it was seen that the social group the student and their family belonged to had a correlation with their annual income. This is illustrated by the graph given below.
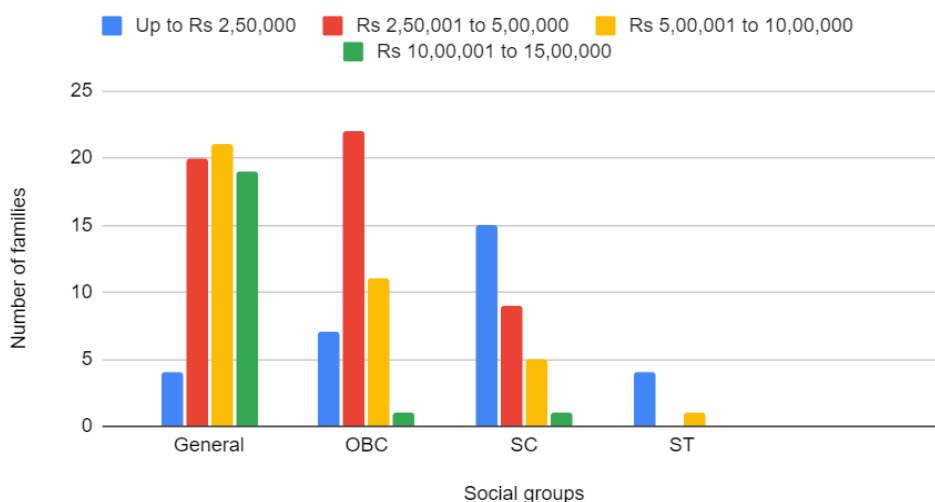
The annual income of a student's family has later been found to have had a role in their experience with online education during the lockdown.

95.3% of the respondents claimed to have had attended online classes when traditional in-person classes were suspended and only 24.7% of the total sample population had any experience of attending online classes before the pandemic broke out.

The answers to the rest of the multiple-choice questions have been briefly presented in the following table:

Questions and opinions	Frequency	Percentage
Did you own any devices that you could use to attend classes?		
Yes, I had a personal laptop/computer.	58	38.7%
Yes, I had a personal tablet/mobile phone.	53	35.3%
No, I borrowed a device from my family members.	29	19.3%
No, I borrowed a device from my neighbors/relatives/others.	10	6.7%
Did you have a separate room for yourself for studying/attending classes?		
Yes	78	48%
No	72	52%
What part of the required syllabus could you cover during this time?		
90-100%	27	18%
Over 50%	66	44%
Less than 50%	44	29.3%
Less than even 30%	13	8.7%
Did you experience any mental health issues (anxiety, stress, depression, etc.) that made it difficult for you to study?		
Yes	111	74%
No	39	26%
How much time did you spend studying during the lockdown?		
More than I did when I attended physical classes.	36	24%
As much as I did when I attended physical classes.	30	20%
Less than I did when I attended physical classes.	84	56%

How did the pandemic affect your and your family's financial condition?		
My family's financial condition was not affected substantially.	53	35.3%
My family's financial condition was affected substantially but not enough to make me consider dropping out.	78	52%
The effect on my family's financial condition made me consider dropping out.	19	12.7%
How were your academic scores during the pandemic?		
My aggregate was better than usual.	90	60%
Same as usual.	30	20%
My aggregate was worse than usual.	30	20%
Do you think that you would have studied better and scored better marks had offline classes and offline exams been conducted?		
No, since online classes give me more time to study	19	12.7%
Yes, but only if offline classes were conducted and not offline exams.	61	40.7%
Yes, since my access to online mode is limited.	28	18.7%
Yes, since I cannot grasp what is taught online.	34	22.7%
Other opinions	8	5.2%

Moving to the qualitative questions that the respondents were asked either via the Google Form or in-person, it was found that the experiences described by students from different socioeconomic backgrounds differed greatly. A medical student, for example, complained about missing out on practical learning, for theory however he said that he faced no problem studying on his own. Many students from high and middle-high-income families said that online classes helped them save their time from commuting and they could self-study better. Their access to tutors and other online materials was relatively better so they did not have any problems covering the syllabus. Most of them seem to have no complaints about online examinations as the reduced syllabus and general lack of invigilation helped them score better. Some were also glad to have been able to stay at home and give time to their hobbies, one student for example said that she progressed on her hobby of making music during the lockdown.

Among the students from lower and middle-lower income groups, the response was that they actually lost time during the lockdown as they had to help with chores and odd jobs to help their financial condition during the lockdown. The lack of a stable internet connection and devices to attend online classes was another issue. One student said that he used to borrow a laptop from his neighbor whenever he had to attend classes, and constantly asking for it made him feel embarrassed. Another student informed that she attended the classes using her father's smartphone, which she could not have access to when her father was busy or outside the home, so she regularly missed out on classes. Many students from this group informed that since they could not go to school and access the library materials, they could find any reference books to study from.

All the students, however, complained about the lack of motivation and concentration. A majority of the students experienced stress and anxiety over their future during this time due to the isolation and being cooped up in the same place all the time. The respondents who did not have a separate room to themselves (spread across all socioeconomic groups) complained about distraction because of their siblings, parents, or relatives. A student said that he stopped studying during this time since he thought that he could score good marks by just cheating on the online exams. Though things seem to have started better for students from higher-income groups, all the students eventually suffered from the lack of motivation, isolation, and distance from their teachers and educational institutions.

V. DISCUSSION

The suspension of offline classes amidst the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant effect on students of all ages and from all socioeconomic backgrounds. However, analyzing the responses from our online survey and the one-on-one conversation with different students we may come to a fair conclusion that the experience suffered by students from low income and backward social communities was aggravated by their status. It is important to acknowledge and accept this divide to craft the most effectual policies possible to address the impact of COVID-19 on the education sector.

Students from marginalized backgrounds were unable to regularly attend classes due to the lack of a stable internet connection or a device to do classes through, or both. In the face of economic problems brought about by the pandemic, students from poor families were forced to start working to supplement their family's income. This effect worsened the pre-existing issue of child labor in the country. Such students contemplated dropping out because they either did not have the time or money to continue their education. Compared to students from higher-income backgrounds, students from low or lower-middle income families used devices with smaller screens (like

mobile phones and tablets) that strained their eyes to attend classes that usually lasted for the duration of an entire working day. Other than these extra issues, such underprivileged students also suffered the isolation, stress, and lack of concentration that their more privileged counterparts complained about.

There has been a curious observation in the survey. While almost all students complained about studying less than usual due to the mental stress that the online classes put them under, a majority (60%) reported that their aggregate score in fact was better during the lockdown than it was before the pandemic. This discrepancy was understood by the responses to the next question, where a majority (40%) of respondents said that they would have done even better had offline classes and online exams were held. This shows the effect of online examinations and marks inflation that they have caused. Students' motivation to study has been driven down as they have started to feel that they can be well off in examinations even without studying.But this also gave students anxiety about how they were not effectively studying anything at all. This small benefit of online examinations remained elusive for several students from poor families nevertheless as they did not have the kind of access to the online mode that could help them get reference material, attend all classes and write exams.

Back in 2020 (and for 2021 secondary and senior secondary exams) students were erratically promoted to the next class without exams. Decisions like these have caused students were not even thorough with what they should have learned previously to be promoted to study the material of the higher, more difficult classes. This may cause the COVID-19induced loss of learning to only keep growing. The need to mitigate and reverse this has already been felt by the government and policy-makers, inspiring the roll-out of various initiatives such as the Diksha portal, e-Pathshala,Swayam and Swayam Prabha. There have been relentless efforts to connect the students tothe learningprocess despite the lockdownbut the work in the direction of making such initiatives accessible to students from disadvantaged communities remains pending.

While steps such as distributing dry ration kits by the Delhi government to the students of public schools must be appreciated as they use the network of schools to avoid a potential food crisis, it is important to highlight the need for policy steps to undo the damage done to the education of such underprivileged students as well.Resources must be used to target the students who were most hard-hit by the closure of schools and HEIs. Digital services should be added to the social safety programmes that are already functioning to distribute ration and other necessities. Distribution of printed study material to students who have not been able to study via online means is an option. An initiative like Swayam Prabha should be publicized through easily accessible means such as newspapers, pamphlets, and even radio so that the students who may not be able to use the internet all the time can study through their T.V. sets.

Internet connections and devices like laptops, if not just distributed for free, can be subsidized for the students who have been unable to afford them, or options of easy loans can be available to students who can afford them. For example, the Dutch Government has allocated €2.5 million for the purchase of laptops for students in general and vocational education who do not have adequate equipment at home. Such devices can also be deployed at the community level and made free-to-use for students who need it. New applications for online conferencing and other learning needs which may work at even low bandwidth can be developed. Need-based scholarships and financial aid for students who are considering dropping out due to their financial situations are also essential at this time. For students living in rural areas, relevant infrastructure should be expressly developed and it must be made sure that there is the required internet bandwidth and electricity for them to connect digitally. There is an urgent need for steps in this direction to make education equitable and ensure that no student is leftbehind due to their or their family's social and economic standing.

VI.CONCLUSION

Covid-19 has had an undeniably immense impact on the education sector. Suspension of in-person classes made educational institutions suddenly switch to online modes of learning, creating anxiety among students. While the pandemic brought the traditional processes of teaching and learning to a standstill, it also paved the path to various innovations in the sector, and digitization of education was accelerated. However, India still has a large population of people that are not sufficiently connected with the infrastructure needed to access e-learning.

Problems like facing isolation and losing the motivation to study have been common among all students, but the students from marginalized backgrounds have had a share of extra problems. Due to the lack of amenities such as a laptop or any other device, a stable internet connection, or a separate room of their own, the lockdown has been particularly hard on them. While their more privileged counterparts could at least use the opportunity to use the extra time for their hobbies, self-study, or get better academic scores, the students from disadvantaged backgrounds faced problems in even attending online classes. Many considered dropping out due to their financial condition and seek employment instead.

Efforts should be made by the government and policy-makers to fix this divide and work to bring the initiatives meant to help to learn during COVID-19 to the students that have been most affected by the pandemic. With adequate and quick steps, the learning loss caused by the pandemic, especially among disadvantaged students, can be avoided from happening any further and can even be reversed.

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