

Implications of Post-COVID Virtual Education on Students from Isolated Tribes: A Case Study of Kanis, Kerala

Midhun Manohar¹, Rubeena T. A.²

¹Research Scholar, Department of Geography, University College, Thiruvananthapuram, India

²Assistant Professor, Department of Geography, University College, Thiruvananthapuram, India

Abstract: *The humankind is battling the devastating disease, COVID-19. Tougher situations often lead to innovative ideas, as we are witnessing the emergence of a virtual world, where modern communication technologies start to dominate all aspects of human life. This revolutionary change has also modernized educational structure and pedagogy in many countries. The virtual classrooms and online learning platforms are becoming widely popular. Though, it is the need of the hour to adjust to this tough situation, one has to analyse whether it has any negative implications. One such key issue arising in Kerala, the southernmost state in India is that the new educational setup has added to the pressure on the students belonging to backward communities especially the tribal people. These people who cannot afford modern amenities such as television, computers or smartphones have limited access to the virtual class rooms. This has led to confusion and agony among the tribals regarding their education. The present study discusses the response of students from the Kani tribes, living in two areas having varying accessibility. It analyses whether online education is effective in tribal areas and whether it has led to any form of social discrimination. The data was collected with the help of questionnaire surveys and telephonic interviews. The study shows that, in least accessible settlements, most of the students are unaware of the online classes. The lack of modern communication system has restricted their accessibility to education. The online classes couldn't meet the aspirations of students from isolated areas and those belonging to the poorer socioeconomic strata. It becomes the collective responsibility of the government, elected representatives, social welfare organizations, NGOs, charity workers and the community to ensure access to education among the marginalized tribal children of the state, thereby erasing out the digital divide.*

Keywords: Virtual Education, Digital Divide, social equity, Tribal Education

1. Introduction

The technologically advanced man who designated themselves as the leader of the earth is battling a tough fight against a microorganism. Humankind has never been challenged this much in the recent past. Virus outbreaks are becoming common and humans have fought it out in the past, but Covid-19 has already caused lives of half million and till date the number of patients is increasing at a rapid pace. Apart from health care emergency and confusions in reducing the risks, the outbreak has its negative impact on all aspects of human life. It has already led to serious economic depression throughout the world. The prolonged lockdown and mobility restrictions have adversely affected economies of most countries. Even the developed countries are finding it difficult to prevent the spread which in turn has badly hit their economies. Apart from great economic losses, the present conditions have also led to serious social issues. Different countries have adopted different strategies to overcome aftereffects of this health hazard. But in some cases, inapt approaches without proper learning have resulted in social anarchy and inequity within the society.

As the tougher situation leads to innovative ideas, we are witnessing the emergence of a virtual world, where modern technologies are starting to dominate all aspects of human life. With social distancing becoming the norm, men try to cope with the existing situation by adopting ways to minimize the physical contact. The online services gained wide popularity in all sectors of life ranging from communication, banking and in exchange of goods. These revolutionary changes were also adopted in educational

sector. Though online education is very common in Western countries, this new academic structure has become the need of the hour for all the nations. It has become very essential in countries like India, where the effects of COVID-19 are expected to last for a few months to few years.

India claims to have prevented the rapid social spread in the first phase of the viral outbreak but as of later the conditions in some states like Maharashtra, Delhi and Tamilnadu are quite alarming. But the southernmost state of Kerala, where the first Covid-19 case in the country was reported, in early March has done a great job in limiting the number of patients and death cases far below the national average. The well maintained and equipped hospital and lab facilities at grass root level, along with appropriate governance and coordination of health department in the state has kept the disease spread in check. Thus the 'Kerala Model' in Covid-19 battle received applauses from many parts of the world. The better healthcare facilities along with high literacy rate and attitude of people made it possible for Kerala to withstand in these tough times.

Apart from the best health care facilities in the country, Kerala is also renowned for its educational sector. The state has the highest literacy rate in the country, and has always given serious investments in the educational sector. The outbreak of Covid-19 in the state has forced the closure of schools since early March. As a response to prevent virus spread, annual school examinations were cancelled with immediate effect. However the 10th level exams were successfully completed by the end of May. The State government has recently initiated online education via

Volume 10 Issue 1, January 2021

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television channels and Smartphones in the new academic year starting in June. This initiative was widely applauded at first but came to critical scrutiny, when a 15 year old girl from poor socioeconomic background, committed suicide, as she was not able to access the online classes since she had no televisions or smart phones at her disposal. This led to queries on the level of inclusiveness of online education system as students from poor socioeconomic background, mostly from tribal colonies and dalits are left out from the mainstream education system currently in prevalence in the state. There was no clarification regarding the ways in which students from such communities could be accommodated within these emerging educational systems. The strongest argument against the new academic initiation is that it has benefited only certain sections of the society whereas it led to social exclusion and discrimination of students belonging to the poorer sections of society.

The present study is an attempt to compare the educational structure of two contrasting groups of Kani tribes of Thiruvananthapuram district in terms of their accessibility to transportation and communication networks. The first group is those who have greater accessibility and live close to the town whereas the second group has the least accessibility and live far away from the town. The responses of students, from these two distinct groups of the same tribe, on the government initiated online classes were collected. The second group of students' lives in colonies of limited connectivity as majority of the members is forest dwellers and is living with little modern amenities. The literacy rate is very low and students in these colonies are mostly hostellers who depend on government aids and grants for their education. The first group living in tribal colonies has better connectivity, and are witnessing a stage of cultural diffusion and tribal in this zone are more educated and employed. However, the new academic reforms and online education system is expected to make the life difficult for the students of the Kani community. The present study is intended to find out whether the modern way of education would aggravate the socioeconomic divide within the same community. Further, the study intends to suggest measures to overcome the challenges in adopting online education in tribal colonies in the study area.

2. Review of Literature

Bhasker Tripathi (2020) explained about the impacts of Covid-19 on tribal life by interpreting the preliminary assessment report of central ministry. According to him, due to lockdown about 1.2 trillion rupees worth minor forest products such as leaves, gums, waxes and honey etc. could go to waste. This could adversely affect the tribal economy and can influence their lives in the upcoming years. It suggests measures to protect tribal groups and their livelihood during the time of pandemics.

S.J Daniel (2020) studied on the innovative ideas developed in the field of education to cope with the existing pandemic. It gives suggestions to students teachers and institutions to counter the difficulties in online education system. It calls for encouraging asynchronous digital education in which students can access the study material at their time. This

could possibly overcome the challenges on live online classes.

Simon Burgess et al (2020), studied about the impact of pandemic on education. They elucidate the functioning of school and families in addressing the problems in online education. The study suggest that it would not be easier to completely moving to virtual classes as it would causes inequalities within the society. The schools should find mechanisms to make up the lost hours. It also suggest that assessments should not be skipped rather it should be postponed.

WV Lancker et al (2020), discussed on the present social crisis of child poverty due to school closures. The schools of about 138 nations are closed down due to the pandemic and it had affected the education of about 80% of global students. The study analyses how school closure could led to food insecurity and inequalities in educational outcomes. The study points out that the modern means of online education would widen the learning gap between students from high and low income families.

Prasad, A K (2010) in his study found out that the majority of the tribals are living in remote areas, far away from schools and other educational institutions. The problem of dropping study at various levels was widespread among the tribals in the study area. Majority of the tribals are educationally backward in the sense that majority of them are dropouts and their qualifications are below the matriculation level. This situation seems to be a big hurdle to their faster socio-economic development.

Rudolfe, Herdias study on " Tribal Education - Need for Literature pedagogy of Social Transformation" reveals his view that if the developmental dilemma that confronts our tribal is to be successfully addressed, tribal integration will require their mobilization which will not just preserve their cultural autonomy but also to remove their minority status as well so that they can participate in their own development, which essentially requires their enlightenment.

3. Aims and Objectives

The aim of the study is to compare the impact of recent educational reforms on students from Kani community living in least accessible colonies and more accessible colonies in Kuttichal Panchayat. The major objectives of the study are:

- To analyse whether the accessibility had any role in achieving the goals of virtual education during Post-Covid times by comparing the responses of students from the least accessible and more accessible Kani settlements within Kuttichal Gramapanchayat in Thiruvananthapuram district.
- To analyse whether limited resources in least accessible settlements created a sense of discrimination within the Kani Community.

4. Methodology and Study Area

The primary data for the study has been collected from two set of samples namely Sample-A and Sample-B using

simple random sampling. In sample-A, four easily accessible tribal colonies (those having good regular transportation services and easy access to nearby towns were selected namely Pankavu, Valiyakunnadi, Thottinpuram and Pongumkuzhi.) Similarly in Sample-B, four least accessible settlements namely Pattampara, Kunnatheri, Cherumaankal, Plaavila having isolated location and decrepit transportation facilities were randomly selected. The data has been collected using direct questionnaire survey, however post Covid-19 data's were collected through telephonic interviews.

In the 4 selected settlements of Sample-A and Sample-B, a total of 26 households each were selected as samples by proportionate sampling based on the total number of houses in each colony. In Sample-A there were 25 students whereas in Sample-B there were only 14 students. The primary data from the samples have been collected through Schedule based Surveys, Group Discussions, Participant Observation and Post-lockdown data was collected using direct and indirect telephone interviews. The collected data has been tabulated with the help of MS Excel software. For the study, data is analyzed using suitable statistical methods such as graphs, charts, tables and diagrams.

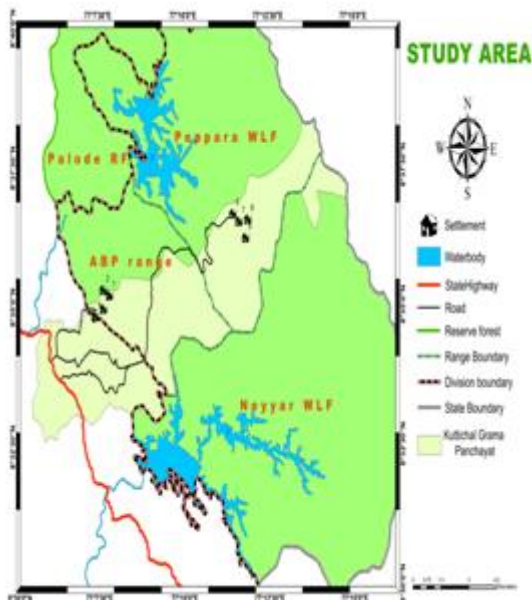


Figure1: Study Area

5. Results and Discussion

The study points out the fact that in Sample-B, which is more geographically isolated and least accessible have comparatively lower literacy rate than those in Sample-A, where there is adequate connectivity with outside world. The proportion of uneducated people is also higher (51%) in Sample-B, which is only about 6% in Sample-A. All the respondents below 20 years old, are currently studying in Sample-A, whereas in Sample-B, only 68% of respondents are currently studying. Further in Sample-B, all the students use hostel facilities for their studies whereas in Sample-A only a mere 8% use hostels, whereas remaining are making use of the nearby educational institutions owing to better accessibility.

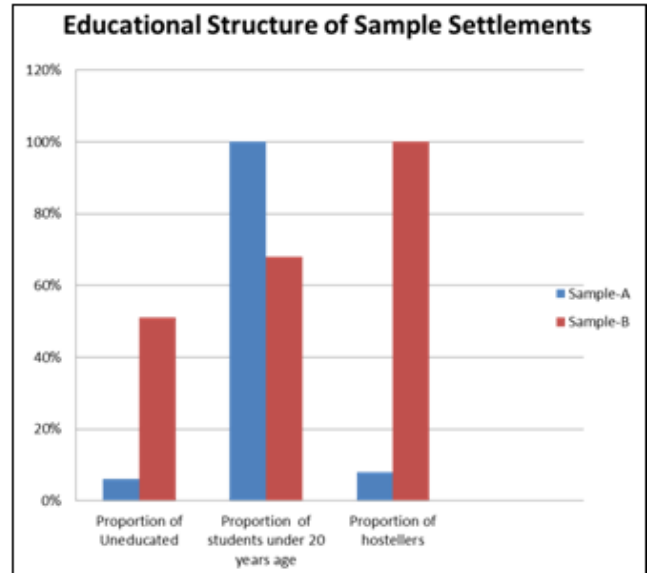


Figure 2: Educational Structure of Sample Settlement

In sample-A a significant proportion of samples (88%) own Television and cable network, but in Sample-B, only 46% of people have television. In Sample-A about 96% of people have mobile phones in which 66% own Smartphones with Internet facilities. The situation is worse in Sample-B, where only 34% of people have Mobiles phone and unfortunately only very few of them has a Smartphone. There is no adequate mobile connectivity in the case of Sample-B.

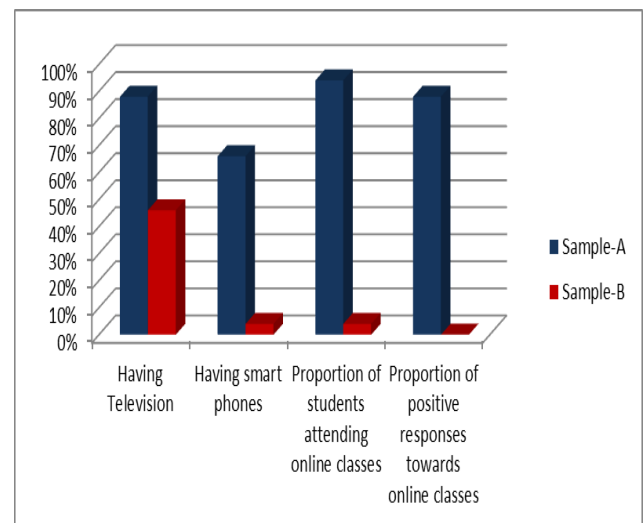


Figure 3: Comparison of attitude towards online classes

The response of students in Sample-A, on the ongoing online education via television and Smartphones was positive. Majority of the school students have already attended their classes via television, whereas college students make use of Smartphones. But the students in Sample-B are unaware of the ongoing progress in studies and had no opportunity to attend online classes. In Sample-A, students have adapted to the educational reforms whereas in Sample-B, they are moving away from education.

The present study points to the fact that the educational reforms during Covid-19 times have a negative implication on students of socially and geographically isolated tribal

colonies. There weren't any measures to assure education for students from such remote areas. This has created a sense of discrimination among the communities. If the problem is not solved in the near future, it would cause division within the Kani tribal group. The more accessible would become more prominent by making use of modern education system and thereby filling government reserved jobs in various departments whereas those Kani settlements in remote areas would continue to live a poor life. Most of the students in Sample-B were hostellers with government aids and scholarships. There should be measures to accommodate them in such hostels where they could also attend online classes without the feeling of alienation. Also nonprofit organization and individuals can play a huge role in assuring education to all such students.

Table 1: Comparison of two sample clusters

Sample	A	B
Number of respondents below 20 years old	25	16
Number of students	25	14
Number of non-educated	0	2
Number of students using online education	25	0
Number of households Having Smart phone	2	16
Number of households Having Television and cable network.	25	12
Number of hostellers	0	16

Source: Sample Survey

6. Conclusion

The present situation demands sudden action to overcome difficulties of students in inaccessible settlements and belonging to socially and economically backward communities. The communication systems and accessibility should be considered as indicators of social development in this modern age. Unplanned and poorly executed reforms in educational structure could lead to division and exclusion within the society. This could retard the progress of many tribal communities and can reinforce a stage of stagnant social development. In these difficult times of Covid, it is essential to adopt timely changes in all fields of life, so does in educational sector but there should be proper measures to ensure education, to all who aspire for, without creating any sense of discrimination.

7. Acknowledgement

The first author is thankful to the University Grants Commission for providing the funds in the form of Junior Research Fellowship [JRF]. The authors are thankful to the Department of Geography, University College Thiruvananthapuram for providing the facilities for conducting the study.

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