COVID-19 and Higher Education in India: Impact and Challenges

Bhavya Bharti

J. R. F, Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, BHU, Varanasi, India

Abstract: *COVID-19 is an unprecedented event in World history that has affected and changed every sphere of Human Life. There is a paradigm shift in the modes and ways of human interaction and, metamorphosis in how we use to communicate and disseminate information and knowledge. The COVID-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption of education systems in history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries and all continents. Pandemic has impacted Higher education in two broad ways, on one hand, it has led to unparallel disruptions in education, the closing of educational institutions and growing disparities, on the other hand, it has stimulated innovations in higher education.*

Keywords: COVID-19, higher education, India, impact, challenges

1. Introduction

On March 11, 2020, WHO (World health organization) declared COVID-19 as a pandemic. Sudden nationwide lockdown in response to the tackling of the COVID-19 outbreak had a devastating effect on every sector and education, was not an exception. The impact of COVID has been such that Thomas Friedman argued that the world will henceforth be divided into B. C (Before Corona) and A. C (After Corona). Every School, College and University in the country had no alternatives and they were forced to close their offline work. Due to the extended lockdown, examinations were postponed, the entrance examination for several universities were halted, research work (Particularly, those which required the lab facilities) has suffered the worst due to the closure of labs and inaccessible campus resources. According to the United Nations report "Education during COVID- 19 and beyond" COVID- 19 pandemic has affected nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries and all continents. The learning loss, in the short and long term, is expected to be great. Researchers in Canada estimate that the socio - economic skills gap could increase by more than 30 per cent due to the pandemic. [1]

Since, March 2021 India witnessed a massive second wave of COVID-19, which was more deadly than the first wave. The second wave of COVID 19 caused catastrophe in India. By the end of April 2021, India became the first country to report over 400000 new cases in 24 hour. Now, with the possibility of a third wave of corona virus, universities are not opening and, the situation has left many students grappling with uncertainties. Social distancing and restrictive movement have disrupted traditional practices of education but as it is said "necessity is the mother of all inventions" there has been significant growth in Online Education as a viable alternative during the Pandemic. Government of India is also making effort to diminish the impact of closure of educational institutions by promoting digital modes of learning. MHRD and UGC has launched various digital platforms like sodhganga, SWAYAM, e-gyankosh, gyandarshan, gyandhara, national digital library of India e. t. c for students to continue their learning, COVID-19 has certainly paved the way for Digital/Online education and online assessments. But many challenges have

confronted higher education which includes - "large Digital Divide", lack of digital infrastructure, digital illiteracy and lack of conducive environment at home for learning.

Objectives

1) To assess the impact of COVID-19 on higher education in India.
2) To highlight the challenges faced by higher education during COVID and in Post - COVID era.

2. Methodology

This paper is based on the secondary data collected from various published papers in national and international journals and government reports, newspaper articles. Reports by international organizations like UN, IAU and UNICEF are also used wherever applicable. Information from authentic websites regarding the impact of COVID-19 on Indian higher education has been searched and analyzed by the researcher. More emphasis and stress was given to Secondary data as it was not feasible to collect Primary data due to Pandemic.

Impact of COVID-19 on Higher education

COVID-19 has disrupted all the educational activities in Higher Education Institutions across the country. Due to the Lockdown and physical closure of College and University campuses, regular offline classes were suspended, university examinations were stalled, entrance examination for enrolment in Colleges and Universities was delayed, research work requiring lab facilities hit hard and seminars, recruitments either got postponed or cancelled. While Students preparing for admission to the university through Entrance went into a state of bewilderment and those students who were enrolled in any of the universities were equally puzzled regarding their promotion. These all had several impacts on the Mental and Psychological health of Students, to various degrees. COVID-19 has created both positive and negative impacts on higher education. While passive learning, challenges to quality research, unprepared teachers for virtual class and reducing student enrolment along with reducing Placement trends and impact on

Student's Mental and Psychological health had been affected. At the same time, the COVID-19 has also created some positive impacts on higher education such as blended learning, promoted the use of ICT in Education and increased innovation in content delivery.

Declining Enrolment trends: There is a decrease in the enrolment ratio in Higher Education during this Pandemic. Recent reports suggest that during spring (2021) there has been the largest decline in college enrolment in a decade. [2]There is also uncertainties over the Future and According to IAU, COVID-19 and survey report, 80% of respondent believe that COVID 19 will have an impact on the enrolment numbers for the new academic year. It will further jeopardize the ambitious target of Gross Enrolment ratio of 50% by 2035 from 26.3 % (2018) in the New Education Policy 2020, which is based on Pillars of "Access, Quality, Equity, Affordability and Accountability". [3]

Quality of Research: India is a well - acclaimed Brainpower and Quality Research is fundamental to the continuation of this status. PM Modi highlighted the importance of Research for an aspirational country like India by alluding to "Jai Anusandhan" [4] Quality of Research is pivotal, as it directly translates into the quality of teaching. Pandemic has impacted research in both Positive and negative ways. On the negative side, due to closed labs and closed libraries researchers faced lots of challenges accompanied by travel restrictions which affected field research. Eighty per cent of higher educational institutions reported that research has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic at their institutions (IAU global survey report). There has been a Positive impact also as Pandemic gave academicians time and space to revisit their theoretical research and use existing technology to upgrade their findings. [5]

Online Education– In the Face of Lockdown formal education has shifted to a viable alternative to online learning. Teachers adopted e - learning methods through the use of many online teaching platforms like Use social media tools and software like Google meet, Zoom, YouTube live, Techmint, Facebook live, Whatsapp, telegram e. t. c for online teaching as well as conducting webinars and workshops. The online education market in India size is expected to grow by USD 2.28 billion and record a CAGR of 20% during 2021 - 2025. [6] Technology has revolutionized traditional education and learning. There are many software companies providing education Software solutions and Open learning Management system which has grown exponentially during this Pandemic. After the establishment of the First MOOC platform in 2006, many new valuable MOOCs like Udemy, Course era, Teachable, Skillshare, Course craft e. t. c are providing online learning and training. In the pandemic era, the demand for short term, skill - based courses provided by these platforms increased. It is estimated that The Massive Online Open Course (MOOC) market could be worth $25.23 billion by 2025 (Globe News Wire). These software's have not only acted as the saviour in the continuance of teaching and learning during the pandemic but these are also cost - effective in organizing webinars.

Reduced Employment Opportunity: The career plans of many research scholars and postdoctoral students due to sudden interruption in the recruitment process are also at risk. Campus placements and Job recruitments of fresh graduates and postgraduates students had been adversely affected; campus placement hit hiring in 82% of colleges in India, during Pandemic [7]. This will further increase the rate of unemployment and distress among the degree holders. It will have further effect on the mental health of our Human Resources. These uncertainties for examinations and Jobs have created anxiety and depression among youths.

Loss of Academicians- Many Universities in India suffered a great loss of life among teaching and research faculties. As per reports, Aligarh Muslim University lost 16 current and 18 retired teaching faculties in Pandemic. Banaras Hindu University and Delhi University, both Public Institution of Imminence [8] has lost more than 15 teaching Faculties as per reports. Other universities and colleges are also suffering from the loss of faculty members which will only increase with the continuation of the Pandemic.

Changing mode of assessment- The mode of examination has shifted from offline to online. Universities have developed their digital platform for assessment and evaluation. University Grant Commission has permitted Universities to conduct Final semester Examinations through Open Book Method during the First wave. [9] Open book examination has now become a new normal saying goodbye to the strict classroom examination proctored by teachers. Fairness and transparency are always in question with this kind of examination. Quality of learning will be compromised by the student, who will not prepare their lessons properly as there will be no fear of examination. Some University has experimented with Artificial Intelligence based home Proctored - Examination. IIM Kashipur, OP Jindal Global University, Delhi technical university are among the pioneer institutions which has used AI Surveillance for assessment of Student. Despite all these innovative technological interventions, there is always a doubt over these assessment modes.

Seminars and conferences- Before COVID, organizing seminars used to be a time taking and costly process but pandemic led to incessant online seminars popularly known as webinars, scholars and eminent academicians of the world can be brought into a platform more conveniently and it is more cost - effective. Digital Posters, Banner, Broacher replaced traditional printed handouts and Posters and wall hangings. Blackboard has been replaced by Sharable White digital Screen and long Webinars can be recorded at 0 fees. A webinar has become an indispensable part of Online learning exacerbated by the Pandemic. It can be used as an important educational tool beyond and after the Pandemic. According to webinar software, 0N24, there is a webinar every minute on the Platform. In fact, in March 2020, the number of webinars hosted on the ON24, jumped by more than 330 per cent and the number of attendees to these events a double year–over–year.

Social and Emotional Learning: Formal Classroom education helped students in learning and acquiring social and Emotional skills that are required to face challenges in

real –life. Beyond the classroom, college debates and interactions were crucial in shaping the outlook of students, they used to learn to respect and celebrate diversity through continuous engagements and dialogues with students from different backgrounds and cultures. College Campus was an ideal space for building social relationships and Networks that were helpful for the student in their future life. All got replaced into a few inches of a digital screen, which proved disastrous for peer interaction, teacher - student interactions and the development of social relationships. Young University students are vulnerable to a higher level of anxiety, depressions and drug abuse and the Pandemic has deeply impacted the psychological health of students. In a report titled " Youth and COVID-19: impacts on jobs, education, rights and mental well being" "Published by ILO says that 1 in 2 youngsters was prone to experiencing symptoms of anxiety and depression, with over 17 per cent suffering due to consequent impact of COVID-19. Decreased Social interaction with limited movement and closed Campus in future will only exacerbate the challenge. This shows that online education can only complement but not be a substitute for formal classroom learning.

Challenges in the higher education amid COVID-19

1) **Digital divide** - In the face of Online Learning in which Mobile device and Internet connectivity is prerequisite, there is large inequality in accessibility and affordability of Internet connection and Mobile Device. This Digital divide is very evident among rural and urban areas, gender and class. The number of internet users has grown significantly in India yet there is a large gap between People who "have "access to uninterrupted and fast internet connectivity and those who "have not". The Situation is grim when it comes to Villages and rural India, where 66 % of the population resides and only 15 % of households have internet connectivity compared to urban households, where the proportion is 42%. [10] The difference is apparent across Indian states too. For example, the proportion of households with access to a computer varies from 4.6% in Bihar to 23.5% in Kerala and 35% in Delhi. [11] Digital divide correlation with gender inequality became more apparent and discernible during the lockdown; only 33 per cent of women have access to the Internet compared to 67 % Men [12]. The disparity is more prominent in rural India, where the figures are 72% and 28% for men and women, respectively. In this scenario, continuing quality education and examination through online mode will be very challenging for Indian higher educational institutes. This disparity in the virtual world may lead to educational inequalities in the real world among students.

2) **Digital Illiteracy -** Many students, as well as teachers, are not very familiar with operating smart phones and computers. Teaching a course online requires certain preparations like making audio and video content, designing a lesson plan e. t. c. These are turning to be challenging for many teachers. A sudden shift from conventional classroom teaching to teaching on digital platforms has not given sufficient time for training and preparation to the teachers and they are facing it difficult to suddenly switch to new technologies.

3) **Lack of Conducive environment** - Education demands a conducive and peaceful environment. Schools and Colleges are the ideal place of learning, not Home. In India, not all students have separate rooms in their homes and only 38.5% of households in India have only one dwelling room for living [13]. In this scenario, attending lectures in an undisturbed environment would be challenging for many students.

3. Conclusion

This study has outlined the various impact of COVID-19 on higher education in India as well as challenges that have surfaced during the Pandemic. There has been a shift to "Online Education and assessment" from traditional formal classroom learning but statistics shows a deep digital divide that gets more vulnerable for girl students, and lack of emotional and social learning that was earlier part of formal college/University campus education. Despite all challenges; Indian Higher education needs to evolve and adapt to changing circumstances only then the Goal of SDG 4 of UN and NEP of "access, equity and quality "education will become the reality.

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