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Emergency response towards safeguarding children's rights and needs in India: A study on strategies and approaches during COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract---This paper seeks to understand the situation with regard to India's emergency response to children's needs and rights in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. As far as emergency response strategies are concerned, it has proved to be a period of great learning for India. India's lack of preparedness to deal with this unprecedented crisis was being pointed out right from the very beginning. However, India has shown resilience in the midst of chaos and tried to constantly adapt and innovate. Those initiatives are captured in this paper.

Keywords---India, child rights, COVID-19, emergency response, education.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to some unprecedented circumstances that has brought the entire world to a standstill. The nature of the pandemic led to forced lockdowns for prolonged period of time affecting the life for everyone, everywhere. Access to services as basic as regular healthcare facilities, jobs and employment

opportunities, education for children- all stand affected. Every layer of the society has somehow or the other felt its impact and is trying to cope. Those living at the margins and perhaps the most vulnerable, are the worst hit. Most importantly, the pandemic has unveiled newer forms of threats and has posed new questions for India's preparedness or lack of it, in the face of an emergency. Where do children lie in the midst of all this?

Children belong to one of the most vulnerable groups in the society and are also mostly voiceless owing to their lack of voting rights and participation in political discourse. The pandemic has affected children in many ways. It has adversely affected one of their most fundamental rights -- the right to education. All schools in India- both public and private- are physically shut for an indefinite period. While children from affluent families in big cities are able to access online education, those who are not so privileged are still struggling to find a way to get back to books. The situation is critical and of serious concern for those children who are poor and marginalised. Some of them are even deprived healthy food as meals under the Mid-day meal scheme are not functional due to school closure. Images of mass exodus of migrants and daily wage labourers from cities to villages and hometowns brought forth some heart wrenching stories of deprivation, neglect and abuse particularly of children. Incidents of child labour and child marriages are reportedly on the rise.

What then has been India's emergency response to this situation? Has it succeeded in responding to the needs of children in the face of this pandemic? What have been some of the measures that have had a limiting effect on destabilising the impact of COVID-19 on children? How effectively have the civil society organizations responded to this crisis? What have been some of the successful strategies to ensure that children are not adversely affected? What worked and what did not? How successful has India's decentralized structure been in responding to this crisis? These are some of the questions that hold importance not just today but will continue to do so in times to come.

In the light of the above questions, this paper seeks to understand the situation with regard to India's emergency response to children's needs and rights in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper uses a rights-based approach and tries to highlight the strategies and approaches used by state and national governments in implementing the schemes that are especially focused on addressing child-specific. It is hoped that documentation of such approaches will help in (a) creating a repository of approaches that can possibly be referred to for any future emergency response work for children, (b) help capture good practices in emergency response from a child rights perspective and (c) benefit other organizations and those working in the field of child rights through knowledge sharing and dissemination of findings.

Methodology

The study is primarily based on secondary research and also undertaken primary data collection through telephonic interviews with NGO heads and key personnel to get a first-hand account of the key strategies that have been used for responding to the immediate challenges faced with regard to children's services

during COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown in India. The telephonic interviews were scheduled and recorded with due permission and has been an important source of data and information for the study. In addition to telephonic interviews, the study has also made use of direct views shared by panelists during a number of national webinars on child rights and the pandemic's impact on children held between the months of May and December 2020.

COVID-19- A new Crisis for Children

When the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a pandemic along with the world countries Indian Government too declared a series of lockdowns, the first of which started on 22nd March 2020 for a period of 21 days and was soon extended to two more rounds of lockdowns till May 31st 2020. The lockdown meant minimal human movement and thereby an immediate suspension of all travel by air, road and railways. Schools and colleges were shut down with immediate effect and all work in offices and institutions started to take place from home. Only essential government services such as food, ration supply, health services etc. continued uninhibited and people were allowed to step out only in case of medical emergencies or to procure essential goods and services.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected everyone's life in some way or the other. It also had a profound impact on children across all age groups and socio-economic background. While it was observed that children were spared the direct impact of the disease in terms of fatality. Relatively fewer number of COVID cases were observed amongst children as compared to those amongst middle age and elderly. But, children had to bear the brunt of losing someone close, often a primary caregiver. As rightly pointed out in a policy brief developed by Child Rights and You (CRY) in June 2020, "Children today may not be the face of this pandemic but they are at high risk becoming its biggest victims" (Kundu and Bhuta, 2021).

Impact on Learning and Education

The biggest and most immediate visible impact was felt on children's learning and education that stands disrupted till this day. The Right to Education is one of the most fundamental rights for all children guaranteed by the Constitution of India. However, the under preparedness of schools to tackle the situation during emergencies was visible. The schools have to remain shut with no access to learning opportunities especially for the poor and marginalized. Going forward, there are high chances that the learning inequalities will become wider and many children will be forced to discontinue education forever. In addition to this, COVID forced schools to move from onsite to online classrooms. But, with a country where digital divide is a reality such a move further aggravates inequalities (Holly, 2020) with access to few versus many and hence institutionalizing such a move continues to be a challenge.

The unfolding of this move was experienced differently by different stakeholders. The situation with regard to schools, both private and public, in the urban areas was far better with improved network connectivity as schools moved from physical to digital platforms. While private schools with good infrastructure were quick to adapt to the 'new normal and started online classes through platforms, the

struggle to restart remained for Government schools especially in the far-flung areas of the country. The biggest challenge to digital learning for many children in India is with regard to the accessibility of basic digital infrastructure such as smart phones, computers and laptops, uninhibited electricity supply and internet connectivity. According to the data generated by Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MOSPI), while 24% of Indians own a smartphone only 11% of households possess any form of computer and merely 24% of Indian households have internet facility. Further to this, there is a huge rural-urban variation in this data where only 4.4% households in rural India have a computer versus 23.4% in urban India. Additionally, only 15% households in rural India have an internet facility as compared to 42% in the urban areas (Government of India, 2019).

Along with the issue of access there are additional problems such as teacher's training for the adoption of new online medium, the issue of multiple users in case of more than one child in a household and preventing children from getting exposed to cyber-related crimes. Digital literacy is still a nascent idea especially in the rural areas of the country. With little to almost no exposure to the online medium, government school teachers in the remote areas of the country have remained outside the web of technology for learning. In such a scenario, it is only unfair to expect them to quickly switch to and adopt this new medium of instruction. In the urban areas as well, many experienced teachers with less prior exposure to computers and technology were found struggling to adopt the new online teaching methodology.

The biggest threat to children through online medium comes in the form of exposure to cybercrime. While the internet plays an important role in the continuation of education and learning and can be an enabler in that sense, it also exposes children to multiple cyber related crimes such as cyber bullying and exposure to explicit or violent content, things that can influence, impact and adversely affect children who are at an impressionable age. Adequate measures therefore need to be taken to ensure that children are protected in the face of this move.

Along with the inequalities in access to educational resources and opportunities, India has a huge population of highly marginalized and disadvantaged children for whom accessing education even during normal times have remained a challenge. This includes children with disabilities, ethnic minorities, children on the move (migrant, refugee, street-connected children) mostly residing in rural hard-to reach areas and/or urban slums and shanties. The problems related to such children are unique and need to be addressed separately. A recent survey done by an Indian NGO working with children with special needs revealed that 43% children with disabilities may forever drop out of education due to problems faced by them during online education (NCPEDP, 2020).

Impact on life of Adolescent girls

While children have been adversely impacted as a result of COVID-19 pandemic, young and adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable and facing newer forms of discrimination and challenges. It is well-known that India has a long history of

gender discrimination and far from achieving gender equality in terms of opportunities for girls and women. In many parts of the country, girls are still considered to be a burden and parents choose to spend more resources over boys than girls as they do not see any opportunity cost in investing on a girl who will be married off. However, over the years, there has been a positive shift in the scenario as a result of work done by the civil society organizations and various government programs targeting the girl child that encourage girls' education and target evils like sex-selective births and female infanticide.

The COVID-19 however, seems to be reversing the positive trend that was unleashed in the recent past as a result of work done by the Government of India as well as civil society organizations. According to a recent Factsheet released in October 2020 by the Right to Education (RTE) Forum India, "only few months of interruption in learning has demonstrated a greater impact on girls than boys and will continue to disproportionately affect marginalized girls from SC/ST communities, religious minorities and those families that have lost their livelihoods during the pandemic" (UNESCO, 2020).

The situation with regard to adolescent girls' education was already poor prior to the pandemic. Recent statistics show that almost 19.8% girls dropped out from secondary education as compared to 6.3% from primary education (NUEPA, 2016). The completion rate of education at secondary stage for girls is also steadily decreasing. It dropped to 65.8% in 2016-17 from 72.9% in 2015-16 (Mehta, 2021). The biggest reason for this is usually marriage and the fact that education is not free after 14 years of age hence parents especially the ones from impoverished families do not wish to invest in a girl's higher education and prefer marrying them off early.

The pandemic has further exacerbated the situation as there are high chances that a larger proportion of girls would have or will drop out of the education system owing to the spill-over effects of the lockdown on families as they are forced to recalculate the opportunity costs of educating their daughters versus their sons. The socio-cultural norms in our society often lead parents to force their daughters to marry rather than opting for a career, especially in cases where the choice has to be made between a male and a female child in the face of limited financial resources. Further to this, the unequal burden of household responsibilities inevitably falls on the girl child and this trend was reported in many cases during the lockdown. Girls are also often the least likely to have access to technology and internet. Hence, burdened by domestic and care work along with lack of access to internet, some girls have been forced to permanently discontinue their education as a direct fallout of the pandemic. COVID-19 has only made the situation worse and since children are forced to stay out of school the gender divide is getting widened and gender roles reinstated.

Impact on Health and Emotional well-being

A pandemic such as COVID-19 is bound to unleash a sense of panic and anxiety among people that may adversely affect the emotional and mental well-being of individuals. While adults may find ways to cope with such situations, it is often children and adolescents who being young and vulnerable find it hard and

challenging to deal with such things. COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown as well as the associated factors related to social distancing, staying indoors, online schools etc. have had an adverse effect on the socio-emotional well-being of children and adolescents the world over. The impact in this regard is differential based upon the developmental age, economic status, educational status etc. of children and adolescents.

Childhood is an important developmental phase replete with freedom of movement and the ability to explore life with complete independence. However, this sudden restriction on mobility and movement as well as the need to be constantly conscious of one's surroundings along with adhering to norms of maintaining distance and keeping one's nose and mouth covered at all times, if outdoors, has proved to be mentally draining and stressful especially for young children. In a study published online in August 2020 that reviewed ongoing studies on this subject, it was reported that younger children (3-6 years old) were more likely to manifest symptoms of clinginess and the fear of family members being infected than older children (6-18 years old). The older children, on the other hand, were more likely to experience inattention and were persistently inquiring regarding COVID-19. Although, severe psychological conditions of increased irritability, inattention and clinging behaviour were revealed by all children irrespective of their age groups (Singh, et al., 2020).

Children's confinement to homes and their inability to go to school, park and lack of in-person interaction with friends and peers has led to an adverse effect on their psyche where many are showing a lack of emotion and affection to everyday life activities. Developmentally, children require much more in-person interaction than adults as their minds are full of imagination and they require opportunities to socialize and share those ideas with others. However, being home-bound and restricted at all times, there are high chances of boredom setting in that may further lead to disassociation with the outside. Many scientific studies are predicting that children may show a disinterest in going back to school even after it reopens and some may even have difficulty establishing rapport with peers and mentors.

The adverse socio-emotional impact has been the worst for children belonging to underprivileged backgrounds. During the lockdown, stories of migrant population fleeing the cities, walking miles on foot with no assurance of jobs or income are instances that clearly indicate the high levels of stress experienced by impoverished families from weak economic backgrounds. The trauma suffered by children during this sudden and unexpected move is unimaginable. Indian media was replete with stories of lives lost and families that were left distraught during these challenging times. Children from many such families had to face physical as well as mental anxiety at the time of the lockdown and perhaps even later. Heightened increase in negative feelings due to loss of job, frustration and helplessness within families may often manifest in the form of violence against women and children. Unable to grapple with violence at home, children and adolescents may be forced to take extreme steps such as elopement from home or even suicide. The pandemic thus has increased the vulnerability of those who were already vulnerable. According to Childline India, there has been a 50% increase in calls to their helpline number ever since the lockdown was announced

in March 2020. This clearly indicates the increased susceptibility and vulnerability of children to fear, depression and anxiety during and even after the lockdown.

In addition to this, children from migrant families had to face the additional burden of a complete loss of education. Children from such families who were based in cities with access to informal or perhaps the Govt. education system were forced to move back to their villages. Due to lack of access to electronic devices such children could not access online education even when it was made available. In villages too, at most places prolonged school closures has made it administratively difficult to enroll new students. As a result, children belonging to migrant families are at a complete loss from both ends. The govt. needs to have a concrete plan in place for migrant children to ensure their future is not permanently lost.

The pandemic, lockdown and the subsequent months of uncertainty have affected the adolescents in many ways, the most critical one being fear of their careers being affected. The pandemic has upset the examination schedules in many places and due to this many young people's career prospects have been adversely affected. In a study conducted by Dasra in August 2020 specifically on understanding the pandemic's effect on young and adolescent, it was reported that 41% of the young girls and boys who were part of their study expressed fears about their career/education prospects. In addition to such fears, about 40% of girls and boys also expressed the feeling of sadness and depression lasting several days or longer during the lockdown and even after. Counselling and referring such cases to appropriate helplines were some of the response approaches used by some organizations that were a part of the Dasra study (Dasra, 2020).

Increase in Child Marriages, Child Labor and Child Trafficking

Studies related to humanitarian crises in the past have indicated that crisis-induced poverty often leads to an increase in child marriages and child labor the world over. Child marriage, child labor as well as child trafficking are evils that India has been grappling with since a long time. Unfortunately, in India, even prior to COVID-19 and the lockdown there were high cases of child marriages due to widespread poverty and the patriarchal mindset of girls being a burden to be rid of through marriage. India also has a sizable number of children who are engaged in wage labor. According to the 2011 Census data, India already had a whopping 33 million child laborers in the age group of 5-18 years. The pandemic has worsened the situation and provided new dimensions for an increase in this number. It has clearly undone some of the good work that had taken place in the past for curbing early and forced marriages as well as rescuing child laborers.

The sudden loss of jobs, mass return migration from cities back to rural areas as well as an uncertain future has heightened the stress and anxiety levels of India's large informal sector, pushing millions further into poverty. Amongst these, parents with young girls were perhaps the most worried about their daughter's safety and future. This led to a spike in early marriages that would at least guarantee their daughters food and shelter. Reportedly, ChildLine India, a

prominent children's helpline number witnessed a 17% increase in distress calls related to early marriage in June and July 2020 as compared to 2019.

Another reason for early marriage cited by many was directly COVID-induced as marriages in India whether for the rich or the poor continues to be a lavish affair requiring huge amounts of money. Traditionally, it is often the girls' families who have to bear the brunt of wedding expenses and they are expected to often hold big weddings. However, due to the COVID-related restrictions this year, marriage expenses were automatically curtailed as people were not permitted to gather in large numbers. This seemed like an opportune time for many to marry off their daughters without having to spend a large amount of money.

Coupled with the above reasons, the closure of schools has also been an additional factor for the rise in child marriages. In many backward villages, schools often act as an agent of change as teachers intervene and keep a close check on families who have been contemplating marriage for their children. However, due to the prolonged closure of schools, some girls have stayed indoors and lost touch with their teachers and peers. Reportedly, many such girls have been quietly married off without the possibility of any outside intervention to curb the marriage. Similar to schools, civil society and grassroot organizations too played an important role in raising the alarm and curbing forced or early marriage. However, during the lockdown and even after, it was reported that in the absence of such vigilance, people's fears were assuaged and they quietly married off their daughters knowing well that there was no one to intervene or stop it from happening.

Alongside child marriage, cases of child labor have also experienced a spike in the months immediately following the lockdown. As reported in *The Guardian* in October 2020, "In the space of seven months, the country has been set decades back in the fight against child labor...". Children are often taken up by factories for their cheap labor and in the face of poverty many parents found this as the only option left for them. Closely linked to child labor is child trafficking, a phenomenon where children are forcibly transported, usually in large numbers, to remote places and sold off for their labor and services. Several organizations in India are fighting child trafficking since long and rescuing children from being permanently lost. According to the data of one such organization named Bachpan Bachao Andolan, between April and September 2020, over 1200 children were rescued by them from farms and factories in India. This clearly indicates how the pandemic-induced poverty has provided a further impetus and pushed parents to sell off their children to traffickers.

India's Response to the Pandemic

The initial Challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic is certainly one of the most unprecedented events in recent human history and hence a preventive response to it could not be planned as nothing was anticipated. Moreover, the rapid spread of the virus from one country to the next was at such a fast pace that almost all countries were left with limited response or preparedness time. Lockdowns, therefore, were thought

to be the most effective and possibly the only step to curtail the spread of this deadly pandemic. Lockdowns were also perhaps the only opportunity with national governments to plan the next steps and devise emergency response strategies for coping with the virus and its effect.

India is a country with a population of over 13 billion. Hence, the Govt. of India was faced with a multitude of challenges to be able to successfully mitigate the ill-effects of the pandemic on the population at large. To minimize the rapid spread of the virus the government was quick to declare the first lockdown from 22nd March 2020 which was extended in two phases and carried on till the end of May 2020. However, despite that, the spread continued at a rapid pace and the lockdowns too adversely affected the economy and had a profound damaging impact on the large informal sector in India. Migrant workers were forced to flee the cities and there was an influx of people in the remote villages. The local governments had to cope with the additional inflow of population and arrange their food and lodging in keeping with the COVID-19 norms requiring quarantining and safe physical distancing.

In addition to this, schools and Anganwadi (Child care centre) in the villages too had to be shut down and hence the govt. had to devise ways to ensure that children were not adversely affected and that their health and nutritional requirements were being fulfilled during and after the lockdown. The rapid out migration from cities also meant an additional burden on the already fragile rural health infrastructure. It has been estimated that approximately 2 lakh children missed their routine vaccinations between February and March (Rukmini, 2020).

While these were some of the overarching challenges faced by the Indian Govt. and the economy at large, there were specific challenges that were faced by children. Loss of education and inaccessibility to learning, additional burden on adolescent girl children for attending to household chores, rise in cases of child marriage, child labor and child trafficking as well as impact on mental and emotional well-being, the details of which have been discussed in the first section of this paper, are some of the new dimensions of the issue with regard to children.

Immediate Response by the Govt. of India against COVID-19

As an immediate step, the Indian government stepped up all its resources to trace, find, isolate, test and treat persons who were found to be infected by this virus. Some serious surveillance and contact tracing mechanisms were put in place by all State Governments to contain the rapid spread of the virus. Mass testing for detecting COVID-infected persons was also aggravated by April 2020. The Govt. devised a robust emergency response plan targeting COVID-19 victims and ensuring that they get the requisite care and treatment.

A large number of COVID care centers were opened for the treatment of COVID-affected patients in addition to additional beds in govt and private hospitals. Govt. institutes were converted to COVID care centers as well as isolation wards. GoI announced a financial package of INR Fifteen thousand crores towards India's Emergency response and Health System Preparedness package which was utilized towards texting facilities, purchasing and producing protective equipment (masks,

shields and PPE kits), hospital beds and ventilators as well as for training medical and paramedical workforce (Press Information Bureau, 2020).

Following this was a series of compensatory packages mainly targeting the poor and the underprivileged, millions of whom had suddenly lost their jobs and were left unemployed as a result of the pandemic. A complete package of schemes and compensation to cover about two-thirds of the population under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana was announced to provide wheat and rice distributed under the Public Distribution System (PDS) for 3 months since the lockdown began. In addition to this, specific direct money transfers were also made to farmers, widows and persons with disability.

Government's Child-specific Responses to COVID-19

In the face of the COVID pandemic, Government of India tried to take some emergency steps that specifically focused on children to ensure that essential services were made available to all children uninterrupted even during the period of lockdown and after. However, the response time to this varied from place to place. As a result, initially all ICDS services under the Anganwadi system stood suspended till further notice. It was only after the GoI drafted its comprehensive plan and strategy that these services were reinstated. Details of some specific steps taken in that direction are discussed below-

Health and Nutrition: The government also put in place a number of child-centric responses for attending to the emergency situation that arose during the pandemic. Some of those pertaining to children's immediate needs such as food and nutrition under ICDS for the various anganwadi centres in India were continued even during and after the lockdown. The pattern of food distribution however was changed to minimize human contact. A door-to door distribution of dry ration such as wheat, pulses and rice in place of cooked meals was undertaken and the ration was handed over to the parents of children belonging to the age-group of 0-6 years. The way this process was instituted varied from place to place as it took time for the ration to be delivered to all places during the lockdown due to suspension of all travel.

The vaccination and immunization of children, however, had to be kept suspended during the lockdown as this meant direct physical contact. However, this too was reinstated immediately in the month following the lockdown. Many children had to suffer due to the unavailability of timely vaccines as most of the medical staff including ANM workers in villages were busy with COVID-related duties at the health care centers.

Education: Education and learning were the worst affected as schools and colleges were shut down with immediate effect following the declaration of nationwide lockdown in March. Government's response to initiate education took the longest as it was busy responding to the medical emergencies posed by the pandemic. However, eventually it did initiate a number of measures to ensure that some kind of learning was in order for children all over India including those who were in the remote areas of the country. The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) made several arrangements, including online portals and

educational channels through Direct to Home TV (DTH) as well as radios for students to continue learning. Some of the special programs initiated by the GoI in this respect are discussed below.

E-portals such as Diksha which is a repository of e-content for students, teachers and parents that has been aligned with the NECRT curriculum and developed under the guidance of the CBSE Board; e-Pathshala, a learning app developed by NCERT in multiple languages for Grades 1 to 12 that consists books, videos, audio, etc. aimed at students, educators and parents in multiple languages including Hindi, Urdu, and English; SwayamPrabha which is an initiative that has 32 DTH TV channels transmitting educational contents on 24 x 7 basis. These channels are available for viewing all across the country using DD Free Dish Set Top Box and Antenna. The channel schedule and other details are available in the portal. The channels cover both school education (classes 9 to 12) and higher education (undergraduate, postgraduate, engineering Out-of-school children, vocational courses and teacher training) in arts, science, commerce, performing arts, social sciences and humanities subjects, engineering, technology, law, medicine, agriculture.

Child Protection: In view of the rising numbers of cases with respect to child labour, child marriages and child trafficking in the country, a number of civil society organizations and activists came together to put together a policy brief with general as well as specific recommendations to the Government of India for addressing the situation. The recommendation had policy directives on the need for increasing funding for child protection initiatives, childcare facilities and homes so that vulnerable children are cared for, institutionalizing core child protection services in all districts, systems for reporting violence against children as well as safety and wellbeing of frontline workers and caregivers including Anganwadi workers who should be included as 'essential service' under Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS).

In view of these recommendations, National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) was quick to convene a meeting in July 2020 and has come up with a comprehensive plan to combat the rise in child trafficking and crimes against children during the pandemic (NCPCR, 2020). As a first step, it has suggested the identification and mapping of vulnerable families and children at risk of trafficking at the village/urban habitation level. Thereafter, it is essential to connect the identified families with the requisite number of social welfare schemes provisioned by the State/Central governments as it is hoped that a vulnerable family with adequate social welfare cover will reduce the risk of a child getting trafficked.

Simultaneously, the NCPCR has proposed to the State governments to initiate the identification of the 'hotspot' villages and 'urban habitations' that are prone to child trafficking in the Districts. At the local Panchayat level, villages are expected to maintain a register with records of all families and their children and help the government identify those who are particularly vulnerable. The NCPCR also has initiated guidelines for increasing surveillance in the 'Transit Hotspots' such as Bus Stations, highways, railways etc. by the Anti-Human Trafficking Units to nab the culprits and prevent trafficking. Vigilance and creating awareness about

trafficking using posters and sticking pictures of known traffickers should also be undertaken widely in places that are hotspots.

Conclusion

For a country as wide and diverse in terms of population and geographical expanse as ours, impact of COVID-19 pandemic is bound to be profound and long lasting. However, through the concerted, timely and coordinated efforts of the national government at the Centre and the support extended by the civil society organizations working at the grassroot level, India has succeeded in clamping down some of the gravely negative impacts of the pandemic to some extent. India's total number of COVID-19 related deaths stands at a mere 1% of the total population that was affected by it. The recovery rate of patients has been very high and India's phased opening up of services has helped the economy recover, even if gradually.

However, from a child rights point of view, there is still lots to be accomplished. Some essential and basic services such as education has been and continues to be negatively impacted as schools continue to remain shut. The great digital divide is making it difficult for online classes to be accessible for majority of children especially those living in remote parts of the country. Many social evils such as child marriage and child labor have resurfaced and are at an all-time high as a direct fallout of the pandemic and India will need to put in place proper mechanisms to ensure that there is stricter monitoring of such areas. Girls education continues to be in question and a targeted approach to ensure they do not drop out permanently from the web of education and opportunity is required urgently at this stage. The increasing need for a digital India has never been felt more.

As far as emergency response strategies are concerned, while this phase has provided many challenges, it has simultaneously proved to be a period of great learning the nation. India's lack of preparedness to deal with this unprecedented crisis was being pointed out right from the very beginning. However, India has shown resilience in the midst of chaos and tried to constantly adapt and innovate. Some of the practices such as using the 'multilateral platform approach' for concentrated and effective response as shared by UNICEF India, or the initiation of digital classes through innovative mediums such as e-Pathshala and Swayamprabha by the Government of India are some of the good adaptive practices that were adopted and can be institutionalized in future.

While on the one hand, any emergency challenges people and throws up some testing questions, they are also opportunities in disguise, as people try to adapt and find effective and long-lasting solutions to problems. COVID-19 pandemic was such a momentous emergency and one of the biggest lessons learnt has been the unity and collaboration that is required at all levels- government, private and civil society organizations- for effective solutions to be developed. The pandemic was also a moment to retrospect on our country's preparedness to address grave disasters especially in the context of children's needs and rights.

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