

How to Cite:

Boruah, B. (2022). Opportunities and Challenges of Education during COVID-19 Pandemic. *International Journal of Health Sciences*, 6(S1), 2872–2878.
<https://doi.org/10.53730/ijhs.v6nS1.5285>

Opportunities and Challenges of Education during COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract---COVID-19 became one of the most dangerous viral diseases that had a spread over almost all the countries around the world. The impact of COVID-19 can be seen in every sphere of life. This virus had an impact on almost every sector such as economics, politics, tourism, transportation, agriculture, defense, administration, education and many more. Along with other various changes there was a huge change seen in the educational sector. The paper intended to critically understand the issues related to the impact of COVID-19 pandemic and the sudden shift of physical classroom to online mode of teaching and learning. It would be discussing the opportunities and challenges faced by the stakeholders of education of Assam. The paper also tries to point out some suggestions with regards to how we can further improve the whole teaching learning procedure for teachers as well as students.

Keywords---challenges of education, COVID-19, teaching and learning.

Introduction

COVID-19 became one of the most dangerous viral diseases that had a spread over almost all the countries around the world. It is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered corona virus. It made the whole world static for a few months. It changed the lifestyle and habits of human being. It had also changed the relationship, behavior, attitude of people in many ways. Especially when it comes to the biggest sector i.e. education, that has been adversely affected by this pandemic Tari & Amonkar[1].

Most governments around the world have temporarily closed the educational institutions in an attempt to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. For that, no teacher and students were allowed to go to school during that pandemic situation. In our society, from kindergarten to class 12, classes are run by teachers who deliver lessons that start and end with a bell. It became a habit for all. But during that pandemic situation, the earlier concept of classroom changed

International Journal of Health Sciences ISSN 2550-6978 E-ISSN 2550-696X © 2022.

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Manuscript submitted: 18 Jan 2022, Manuscript revised: 09 Feb 2022, Accepted for publication: 27 March 2022
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and online education or online classroom programme was chosen as the alternative way for continuing the education.

Meaning of Online Education

Online education is a type of educational instruction that is delivered over internet. It does not require traditional classroom, physical presence of teacher and students and proper teaching learning environment. The most essential need for online education is to have a computer, if not at least a smart phone having fast internet connection so that one can take education from home without going to school. Online learning give educators opportunity to reach students who may not be able to enroll in a traditional classroom and support students who need to work on their own schedule and at their own pace. As internet is easily accessible at affordable cost, it gave an option for all the students to continue their studies without any disruption and without physically attending the school during this pandemic. With such arising advantages of online education there are voices in favor of way ahead towards making education an entirely digital phenomenon, however at present, it looks practically difficult due to various hindrances amidst those advantages.

Objectives of the study

The main aim of the study is to find out the opportunities and challenges of education in Assam during COVID-19 pandemic and also to suggest some remedial measures for solving the challenges.

Methodology

The study based on secondary sources of data. Data are collected from the books, journals, websites and publications of prestigious institutions.

Analysis and Discussion

A. Opportunities of Education during COVID-19 Pandemic

Every challenge opens up new experiences and opportunities. Sudden close down of educational institutions become a huge challenge for everyone related to educational field. Teachers, students and other stakeholders faced much stress and discomfort to cope up with this pandemic situation. But, every problem has some alternative solutions. The concept of online classes became popular at this pandemic situation that had reached out students all over India with the help of various online platforms. Virtual classrooms are already a popular concept in urban areas, but this lockdown period had made it familiar to the people of rural areas too. The online platforms which enabled students as well as teachers to face the challenges of online education better are as follows:

Various Conference Apps

For online face to face teaching and interactive class conferencing apps like Zoom, Google Meet and Webex meet became popular. These applications provide

opportunity of mutual interaction between teachers and students through audio and video chat. It provides almost same feeling of traditional classroom because many people up to 1000 can connect together at the same time and can interact with each other. These conferencing apps become most useful tool for interaction between teachers and students during this pandemic.

Online Radio

Online radio also helped students during COVID-19 pandemic. The online radio organizes programs related to education which is very important for the students. Also some radio channels webcast popular classes of teachers on various subjects. This online platform is easily accessible for people and also it is one of the cheapest ways of attending online classes. The drawback of this platform is that it is one-way communication and it does not have video contents.

During COVID-19 pandemic, Human Resource Development Minister of India Ramesh Pokhriyal gave opinion in favor of online education and advised students to carry out their studies by using different online learning platforms. According to him, online learning platforms not only provide good study materials but also help students to interact with teachers by engaging in online classes. There are some online platforms launched by Ministry of Human Resource Development which helped both teachers and students during COVID-19 pandemic. These are as follows:

DIKSHA

DIKSHA refers to National Digital Infrastructure for Teachers launched by The Ministry of Human Resource Development to equip teachers from class 1 to 12th class into the world of e-learning. This online platform can be used by both teachers and students whenever learning materials are required. It is a free online application which helps teachers and students to access prescribe learning materials of particular subjects with the help of scanning the QR code available in the textbook. It enhanced e-learning by promoting learning materials up to class 12 which is available in multiple languages. Thus this app became very useful for both teachers and students during COVID-19 pandemic.

SWAYAM

SWAYAM (Study Webs of Active-Learning for Young Aspiring Minds) is a programme initiated by Government of India for the students from class 9 to 12 and also for the undergraduates and post-graduates. SWAYAM promotes the best teaching learning resources to all, including the disadvantaged sections of the society. For registration under any course at SWAYAM, students need not pay any fee as the courses are free of cost. But after completion of the course one can get certificate by paying a minimum fee. Thus, it is also one of the best platforms of online education during COVID-19 pandemic.

SWAYAM PRABHA

SWYAM PRABHA is a very effective and popular tool of online learning for the students who do not have internet access at their home. It is a collection of 32 DTH channels which run 24x7 for the students by using the GSAT-15 satellite. Every day, there are new contents for at least four hours which would be repeated 5 more times in a day. Top education bodies of the nation such as UGC, IIT, IGNOU, NCERT, NIOS, NPTEL and CEC provide contents to INFLIBNET Centre which runs these channels. Students from class 1 to PG level can access the interactive learning process through this platform. Thus, it provides opportunities to the students of rural areas who are unable to access to internet.

e-Pathshala

e-Pathshala is a web-portal which mostly helped school students during the period of COVID-19 for accessing online study materials. Students from class 1 to 12 will be able to access no less than 1886 audios, 2000 videos, 696 e-books (e-Pubs) and 504 Flip Books in this platform. The digital repository has been made available by NCERT to make sure that the students do not miss out on any important concept of different subjects. This platform is very helpful because the study materials are available in various languages.

Shagun Online Junction

Shagun is an initiative platform of Department of School Education and Literacy in Government of India and all states and Union Territories to improve school education system by creating a junction for all online portals and websites relating to several activities. The primary aim of the SHAGUN initiative is to facilitate both teachers and students with a platform where they can interact with each other digitally. It also provided many opportunities to the students during COVID-19 pandemic.

Other Platforms

There are several other platforms such as National Academic Depository (NAD) run by UGC, National Digital Library of India run by Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), Virtual Labs of MHRD and GOI under the mentorship of NMEICT which promotes online education. These online platforms also became useful for students during COVID-19 pandemic.

Thus, we can say that digital world and online learning are expanding its presence globally. These online resources encompassed full of opportunities during the COVID-19 outbreak to avoid any obstacles in the path of teaching learning process.

Challenges of Education during COVID-19 pandemic

In 2020, the newly discovered corona virus had placed many challenges to the whole world. Along with other countries of the world, India also became a heavy target of this virus. For that, nationwide lockdown was imposed with the advent of

the COVID-19 pandemic and this had left educational institutions with no choice but to go digital. But it is not that easy to promote digital learning in developing countries like India where most of people live in rural areas. Students and teachers both have their own struggles for accessing education through online platforms. The students of urban areas can easily adapt online mode of education since they are familiar with this mode. But challenges arise for the students as well as for the teachers in rural areas because it is almost an entirely new concept for them. Thus, they had to face many challenges in online education during this pandemic situation.

Some of the major challenges that can be enlisted in this context are:-

Unfamiliarity with Digital Equipment

The concept of online education is not new as it already made a way in urban educational setups but in some rural areas it is as new as the COVID-19 pandemic. In these areas, some people may be aware about online classrooms but didn't apply it personally. Also there are some people who don't know anything about online classroom system. They always followed the traditional classroom and thus faced problems to take or apply new teaching ideas in classroom. Therefore, shifting from traditional classroom to the digital one in India cannot happen overnight. Teachers as well as students require proper training for online education so that they can be able to use digital technologies properly.

Limited availability of Technical Equipment

A laptop or a smart phone with high speed internet facility is crucial for online education. In rural areas of India, only a few people can access to personal laptops or computers. Laptops are far away facilities for poor people and smart phones also proved costly for some. They generally use keypad mobiles instead of touch screens where most of the apps like zoom, Google meet etc. couldn't be installed. Also, the high rate of internet pack is a big deterrent for both teachers as well as students, especially for live classes. Hence, the online education remains restricted with the limited availability of technological equipment.

No motivation no interest

Self motivation and discipline is necessary for one to take online education. Because in online education assignments are to be completed regularly and upload them at given time. But in some rural areas students engage themselves in household activities and do not show any interest for education. They need the push to get to the class. The sudden closure of schools instead became a cause of immense happiness and joy to them as they didn't have to go to school. Due to lack of teacher's motivation and encouragement they don't even attend online classes. Therefore the dropout rate in online education is very high in rural areas.

Language problem

India is a multi-linguistic country as the people of India use different languages to communicate as well as in taking education. Most of the students of rural areas are from vernacular medium. Language became one of the major challenges

during online education period. Most of the online courses and contents are in English. Hence, those students who are not comfortable with English struggled to cope up with online education easily. They had to pay extra attention and time to cover the course contents.

Lack of trained teachers

For online education well trained and skillful teachers are necessary so that each and every student can cope up with online education properly. In the rural areas, lack of trained teacher is another challenge in online education. Computers or laptops are also not available with all the rural teachers. The problem of high speed internet, electricity and network coverage is also common in rural areas. Due to lack of various facilities, skillful teachers from urban don't want to come in rural areas. Without proper guidance and attention of skillful teachers it is not possible to engage students in online education. Teachers also need additional training.

Suggestions

From the above discussion, we came to know that COVID-19 opened up new opportunities in every sectors including education. Online education became the most popular in this pandemic as it is the only possible way to inculcate education as an alternative way of traditional classroom. Before pandemic, going school was a part of our duty not only to learn different subjects, but for developing social norms, interpersonal relationships and communications. But this crisis changed the entire concept of learning that without being physically present it is even possible to learn through several digital platforms. We are going to witness revolutionary changes in teaching and learning process. As a human we have to develop new opportunities in this pandemic so that we can recompense our education sector.

But online education has its own limitations too. The foremost limitation is related with poor internet connection in rural and remote areas. The inclusive education cannot function properly keeping the underprivileged out of the race. Poor family background or poor economic condition is another challenge of promoting online education as they cannot afford to buy a computer or a smart phone. Also in this crisis many people became jobless which further increased the gravity of this problem. Moreover, there are some people who don't want to come out from their comfort zone and hesitate to upgrade themselves with digital world. Online education will be successful only when it is inclusive in nature i.e. it should encompass all students irrespective of gender, class, caste, economic conditions, geographical area etc. For proper implementation of online education government should take some initiatives as well like provision of delivery of electronic gadgets to prevail the internet facility required along with providing good internet facility all over the country. Teacher's collaboration along with their training (if required) and digital skill development is also needed for promoting smooth online education. Radio and TV stations should also play an important role in promoting online education in India, especially in those areas where smart classroom programme facility is still a distant dream. Parents should be more involved in their children's education process, encouraging and motivating them

to pursue their education diligently. All these together can strengthen the future online education system in our country.

Conclusion

In rural India, traditional learning is in the blood and they don't want to accept new technologies in teaching-learning process. It is also true that, in present India, traditional face to face learning is much more useful than online education as traditional teaching learning encompasses good interactions and communication between teachers and students. But time changes everything. Also, crises don't arrive by informing people. Therefore, we have to cope up with pandemic by upgrading ourselves a little in future. We must progress cautiously but with strong steps. New challenges and new solutions will make our educational system more effective and progressive. This crisis will help us come together across boundaries, not physically but digitally. Therefore we can say that COVID-19 is an opportunity for the education sector to unite digitally across countries and continents.

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