

COVID 19 Pandemic Crises and High School Education Gaps: A Current Scenario in West Bengal

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Abstract: COVID 19 the largest pandemic suddenly affects almost all aspect of human civilization including education. This pandemic imposed global lockdown which drastically appear as an obstacle to the students. All educational institutions around the world have been closed for a different period of time, followed by a closure of teaching learning activities. In India approximately 32 core students were undergone a traumatic condition due to sudden closure of their academic activities and uncertain carrier. But in spite of this pandemic induced difficulties, the educational sector have responds positively and thought to do something for keeping the continuity of teaching learning process during this lockdown. COVID 19, act as a catalyst for the educational institutions, forced them to grow, choose and cope up with the various digital technologies for teaching learning activities. As a developing country, the technological infrastructure is not up to the mark to support mass learning on digital platform, so central and various state government of India take several steps to provide seamless educational services during this crisis period. This article mainly focused on the impact of COVID 19 in Indian education, especially on school education system of West Bengal and addressed several measures taken by Govt. of West Bengal for the continuity of school education. We also critically analyzed the present situation and mention some suggestions which may be helpful to drive this new age online education system.

Keywords: COVID 19, School education, online learning,

1. INTRODUCTION:

Corona viruses are a group of viruses infects human through zoonotic transmission. After Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) (1, 2) in last two decades, in the end of December 2019 a novel infectious disease was identified in the Wuhan city of China. The International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses (ICTV) named it as severe acute respiratory syndrome corona virus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) (3) and the disease named as COVID 19 (4) in February, 19, 2020 by World Health Organization (WHO), an acronym for corona virus disease 2019. WHO declared COVID 19 as pandemic on 11th March, 2020. The first case of this pandemic in India was reported on 30th January 2020 in Kerala and the affected was returning back from Wuhan, China. The first death due to corona virus in India on 12th March 2020 and the nation observed Janta Curfew for a day on 22nd March. Prime Minister of India announced the first phase lockdown for 21 days on 25th March, 2020. As there was no positive sign to slowdown the pandemic Indian Government has been extending the lockdown period in different phases and lockdown 5 was declared on 30th April which was effective from 1st to 30th June 2020(5)

According to UNESCO report, this pandemic had affected more than 90% of total world's student population during mid April 2020 which is now reduced to nearly 67% during June 2020. In India during all the phases of lockdown the educational institutions have never got any relaxation to start their education system. Initially, all the education stakeholders were quite confused how to cope up with this situation but through this lockdown period they understand to manage the sudden crisis of pandemic. The virtual education system becomes the most important and essential medium for teacher and student to continue their educational activities from home. The teachers assigned work to students and delivered their valuable lectures via video conferencing using different apps like Zoom, Google Meet, and Skype etc. For the effective communication by e-medium many educational institutions create Whatsapp groups of teacher, students and parents. In India not every student is well equipped with digital gadgets and high speed internet thus they deprived by this new virtual education world. (6)

2. OBJECTIVES:

The paper focused on the following objectives:

- To highlight the impact of COVID 19 and post pandemic Trends on school education.
- To enlighten various measures taken by West Bengal government for school education during this pandemic.
- To enlist some problems faced by education stakeholders and some effective suggestions for continuing school education during this situation.

3. LIMITATION OF THE RESEARCH:

The present study based on the data and information collected from various international and national reports given by renowned agencies. Information is also collected from a number of authentic websites and e-contents. Several national, international journals and also news, data published in different govt. websites are extensively studied for writing this article.

4. IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SCHOOL EDUCATION IN WEST BENGAL:

Global outbreak of corona virus disease (COVID19) forced a worldwide lockdown including in India. Along with other essential sectors educational institutes of India were also closed from 23rd March, 2020. Admission, examinations, entrance tests, competitive examinations and other educational activities have been halted till then for an indefinite time period, as a result of this sudden pandemic induced closure of education sector. In India more than 1.5 million schools were closed along with higher educational institutes (7). March to May, the prime time for all educational institutes to conduct their term- end activities. Therefore a halt in all these processes is devastating especially the students are under too much pressure regarding their academic and career oriented future but except lockdown measure there is no other options to fight with this pandemic (8)

In West Bengal all educational institutes including secondary schools were closed from 15th March, 2020 by the order of State Government. The West Bengal Higher Secondary Examination 2020 was scheduled from 13th to 27th March but due to pandemic the lockdown first came into effect on 25th March and the papers scheduled for 23, 25 and 27 March, were primarily rescheduled in the first week of July. As per new programmed, the differed papers were scheduled on 2nd, 6th and 8th July and West Bengal Board of Higher Secondary Education (WBCHSE), the regulatory authority of State higher Secondary education, also published a standard guideline for examinees to prevent COVID19 spread, all teaching and non- teaching staff have to wear mask and gloves, students were required to carry sanitizer and transparent water bottle and the examination center will be sanitized. (9). As there is no improvement in the pandemic situation the West Bengal government has cancelled the WBBSE Class 12 board exam 2020, as per Supreme Court hearing in which it was decided that the CBSE and ICSE board exams were cancelled. The result of this examination will be published on 31st July. The education minister also said if any HS candidate had any objection about this evaluation method of the pending papers, he or she can appeal to HS council by sending a mail for writing those papers and after the improvement of the corona situation new dates for the exam will be given. (10). The west Bengal education department decided the no detention policy in all schools (state-run and state –aided) for up to the eight standard students in view of this situation (11). Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) also postponed all school examinations on March 18, 2020 throughout India and issue a guideline for the institutions to conduct exam by maintaining 1 meter distance between not more than 24 students within an examination room. (6)

According to UNESCO around 32 core learners are affected in India, of which 15.8 core are female and 16.2 core are male students. The closure will disproportionately affect children with disabilities, students in remote locations, children of migrant workers, or those whose families have lost income as a result of job loss or precarious employment. Thus, for many children, the COVID-19 crisis will mean limited or no education, or falling further behind their peers. This will induce a large number of children to discontinue their study even after “normalcy” is restored There is a high probability of many of these out of school children getting involved in child labor (12). As all school shut down early marriage of girl child increase, sexual exploitation of female students rises, teenage pregnancies become common. Different types of social activities and pupil interaction are happen in school ground but due to closure of school children miss out these kinds of activities and thus it is hamper the growth and development of them. As there are no options for working parents, they have to leave along their children when school close and this can lead to unsocial behaviors and substance abuse. When schools reopen after all this it will be a challenge to ensure all students return and stay in school (13).

5. INITIATIVES OF GOVERNMENT ON SCHOOL EDUCATION IN WEST BENGAL:

All state government education ministries of India have taken different initiatives to continue educational activities of primary to higher levels during this lockdown period for COVID 19. They decided to adopt digital technology and instruct all schools to take classes online which are the best learning solution during this pandemic situation. The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) as well as West Bengal Education Department have made several positive steps including online portals and educational channels through DTH service, Radio programmes for students to continue learning. All the digital initiatives of government for school education are:

- **Online Portal**

Diksha is an online education portal which contains e-learning materials for all the education stakeholders like students, teachers, parents including textbooks, worksheets, assessments and video lessons. This app has more than 80,000 e-books in multiple languages for primary to HS level students created by more than 250 teachers under the guidance of CBSE

and NCERT. This app can be downloaded from IOS and Google play store and the content can also available through QR codes on textbooks.

e-Pathshala is an online learning app for students of class 1 to 12 , educators and parents in multiple languages including English, Hindi and Urdu . In this web portal 1886 audios, 2000 videos, 696 e-Books and 504 Flip Books are developed by NCERT.

National Repository of Open Education Resources (NROER) is an e-portal which provides lots of learning resources in multiple languages for both students and teachers. The various resources include books, interactive modules, STEM-based games, videos, total 14527 files including 401 collections,1345 interactive, 2779 documents, 6153 videos, 2586 images and 1664 audios on different languages.(6)

- **Online platforms**

In website there are various free live communication platforms that can be used by education stake holders for online learning, video and audio conferencing, video meeting, screen sharing, chat and webinars, video and audio calls, hosting an educational sessions , online documents, text sharing, attendance tracking, small and large group conversation etc.. Some of the most used online platforms are – Skype, Zoom, Google Meet, YouTube Live, Lark, Teams, FreeConference, Dingtalk, UberConference, Facebook Live, Stack Video Calls, Lifesize Go etc. (14)

- The School Education Department of West Bengal had ordered to closure of all educational institutions from March 16 due to COVID pandemic and as the result suspension of classes and all board examinations is occurred. In this circumstances WB Govt. decided directly promote all government school students from class 1 to 8 to the next class. On 1st April MHRD also directed CBSE to promote all students of 1 to 8 classes to the next class (11).
- From 7th April 2020 the Education Department had booked 4-5pm time slot on DD Bangla for virtual classes of students from class 9 to 12 but the plan was shelved as some students, teachers and parents raised objection on the timing. For this logical issue the government will decide the virtual classes will be held on private television channel ABP Ananda from 3-4pm.The studio of this news channel will be converted into a classroom where students can ask questions to expert teachers through phone call or WhatsApp which will be given before the classes start (15).
- West Bengal School Education Department (WBSED) has started ‘Online BanglarShikha Classroom’ on its BanglarShikha portal. Under this online programmed, pre-primary to HS students of WB board can access activity task which have been created based on the syllabus for first summative exam in every school. The task are available in PDF format and students can download them from ties portal. After reopening of school activity tasks have to submit to the respective subject teachers. The students can take help from their teachers and the teachers are advised to communicate with students over phone, SMS , email etc.(16)
- West Bengal Government provide rice and potato for the month of April to the students from class 3 to 8 of state government /aided schools , who cannot collect mid day meal due to lockdown for COVID 19. Students are staying home and only the Guardians of the respective students have to come to the school to collect 3kg of rice and 3kg of potato. (17). From July government provide mask and soaps along with other items of the mid-day meal scheme to help the students fight against corona virus. As people are facing financial problems for lockdown Education minister also request private schools of WB not to take tuition fees in this academic session.(18)

6. PROBLEM FACED BY EDUCATION STAKEHOLDERS:

During the COVID 19 outbreak the country as well as state is facing major crisis in every sector but the worst hit sector is education sector. It has created many negative impact on students, teachers, parents, school academy i.e. all education stakeholders. The problems faced by the stakeholders’ are-

- In this pandemic situation many school brings the learning system online but the Internet connectivity is a major problem for both students and education bodies. According to the 2017-18 National Sample Survey report on education only a little over 15% of rural households have access to internet service and for urban area the proportion is 42%.
- For online classes a computer or laptop is essential while a Smartphone could also serve the purpose. A smart phone is convenient for different types of education apps, but not for research or completing lengthy assignments. In India 77% people own a smart phone (2019), only 11% of households have computer, laptop, notebooks, tabs, and palmtops (19).
- This sudden transformation from face to face learning to online mode, both teacher and students are facing various problems as the necessary knowledge and skills regarding this virtual learning are lacking. Most of the teachers are just conducting lectures on various online free platforms like Zoom, Google Meet etc. but there is no dedicated online learning platform.(8).

- Because of the unexpected closer of schools for unknown duration, teachers are confused how to maintain connections with their loving students to support learning. Distance learning programs tend to be messy and frustrating even in best circumstances, thus school closure lead to furloughs or absenteeism by teachers.
- Parents of the school students are facing various problems to facilitate the learning of their children at home and can struggle to perform this task. Parents with limited or no education are truly unprepared for these new arrangements of online learning system.
- Working parents have to leave their children alone during school closure as they have no alternative options. For this their child led to risky behaviors, increased influence of peer pressure and substance.
- Many children are depend on mid-day meals provided at school for their healthy nutrition thus, when school close, nutrition is compromised as they did not get proper healthy food at home.
- Schools are like mini society where social interaction and activities are happen. During the lockdown children cannot go to their schools and miss out on social contact that is essential for learning and development (13).

7. POST COVID-19: TRENDS OF SCHOOL EDUCATION:

The global pandemic catalyzed the educational institutions as well as stakeholders to adopt new learning system. New technologies will challenge the traditional classroom lecture, mode of assessment and find new ways. The new trends are emerging and allow the education sector to imagine new ways of teaching-learning. Some of the emerging trends are

- **Blended learning:** When both face to face and online learning combines, this is call blended learning. As all institutions are closed during lockdown adoption of digital technology leads to the blended mood of learning. In this model, students will be required to physically attend classes on fewer days and it is a new model in the new normal education environment.
- **Personalized learning:** Personalized learning is that specific learning method in which students can learn at their pace and time of their choice and in this global pandemic it becomes essential. Artificial Intelligence (AI) is important to help personalize a student's learning experience and by this every student can acquire unique educational approach that is tailor made for his/her individual needs. Programmed learning platforms such as Bright Tutee offers an exhaustive collection of online homework, tutorials and assessments.
- **New role of teachers:** Virtual education cannot replace educators but the role of a teacher will gradually shifted from "knowledge –giver" to 'facilitator' in the pedagogy system to help students become life-long learner. In this rapid change in learning system all the teachers have to be trained for online teaching to ensure that they are comfortable with technology and will be able to switch between online and offline mode of learning.
- **Short-term, skill-oriented course:** The global picture of industrialization and economy changed every day followed by change in the need of skilled worker and officials which put many old workers at the risk of losing the job. Now a days, Artificial intelligence, Data mining techniques, deep learning, coding, etc. are highly used in almost all industrial field. So students have to continuously learn these new skills to stay demandable in this global market; this is also a need of the time and education system must designed industry-ready courses for making well-skilled students. (20)
- **Technology based teaching learning:** Students become depend on technology and virtual solution for learning problems. Teachers will use internet technology to take classes and communicate to their students through many online educational platforms.
- **New style of evaluation:** In this pandemic situation educators use digital platforms to evaluate and monitoring the performance of each student. Artificial Intelligence help teachers to develop TLMs, virtual classes, assessment, mark sheet preparation, result declaration and finally up gradation of students (7)

8. SUGGESTIONS:

- Government should provide free internet and digital gadgets to all learners of Govt. and Govt-aided schools so that they can access their online classes in during this pandemic.
- Teachers of Govt. and Govt. aided schools are not habituated with this online system of learning thus the education department should conduct some special training programmers to develop the online teaching skills of the teachers.
- Govt. and education institutions should run the schools in two shift so as they can maintain the limited student number present in a class which is important to maintain social distance.
- Parents of Govt. school children should help their child to proper handling of online classes and doing home task, assignments and activity task.
- Education department of west Bengal is doing well for the development of education stakeholders but should take some policies for the betterment of virtual education by creating govt online education platforms in which

high quality study resources by skilled educators are presented to students of different level. New approaches for academic assessment done through online mode should be adopted by educational institutions.

- The educational institutions need to restructure their curriculum to make students aware about the pandemic diseases like corona, dengue, swine flu etc. which will be helpful for the students, the future of our country. (21)

9. CONCLUSION:

This study has outlined various impacts, problems and future trends of education of West Bengal during this COVID 19 pandemic situation. Due to the outbreak of corona virus, the work from home culture is booming in all over India. Therefore, to maintain the social distance, the education institutions have opted for different digital platforms to facilitate learning for their students from home. Unfortunately only urban education institutes can provide this online education system but the rural area students are oppressed. In India as well as West Bengal, examinations of different board and different classes are cancelled as these exams cannot be conducted online. It is not only just the question of imparting continuous and uninterrupted teaching learning process during this lockdown but also the most important challenge for the educators is to focus on the overall elements of a well-developed course. Through the use of technology, we can mitigate and compensate for the impediments posed and inconvenience caused due to COVID 19 pandemic to the education system and learners by extension. This paper has not covered any statistical analysis on COVID 19 and school education, however further in-depth study with statistical research may also be undertaken.

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