

Online Education during Pandemic: Challenges in Indian Higher Education

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Abstract

This article aims to analyze the implications of unplanned online education in Indian higher education. It discusses the systemic inequalities that surfaced in universities due to the pandemic. The article refers to secondary sources such as research articles, government reports, and newspaper articles to analyze how online education has, perhaps, created more challenges than benefits. It also analyzes how online education has led to creating a further knowledge divide because of the existing digital divide in India. The article focuses on the challenges faced by university students during the pandemic.

Keywords: Online education, higher education, digital divide, knowledge divide, Covid-19 pandemic, marginalization

Introduction

Covid-19 has been damaging for almost everyone across the globe. Yet, it has been more destructive for some than for others. As the global pandemic spread, all educational institutions were immediately and completely shut down. While this immediate shutting down was considered an important step for safety, it produced a sudden and unplanned reliance on online education. In this mass shift to online education, digital inequality was

not taken into consideration. Due to the digital infrastructure gap, there was an automatic invisibilization of many university students, especially from marginalized groups.

Nevertheless, this invisibilization is not new in the Indian scenario. There is a history of discrimination in India and in the Indian higher education system where students have been excluded based on structural inequalities. It is crucial to inquire - What role does online education play in inclusion and exclusion? Can universities democratically provide online education? This article draws on secondary sources to understand the challenges of Indian university students, during the pandemic. More than answers, this article explores some pertinent questions which require further exploration.

Higher Education Before Pandemic

This section provides a brief background of Indian higher education focusing on university students. It depicts the crises of public universities before the occurrence of Covid-19. This section explores the question: Are university students facing challenges only because of the pandemic? To give a brief context, I mainly engage with the works of Apoorvanand and Avijit Pathak.

Apoorvanand, in his book, *The Idea of a University*, discusses the issue of nationalism which is driven by Hindu domination. This kind of nationalism targets universities as its enemies and accuses them of holding secular, liberal, and critical ideologies that are pictured as opposing Hindu nationalism. This puts universities in a position of constantly proving their nationalist credentials to justify their usefulness to the nation. Analyzing hegemonic nationalism in relation to public universities, Avijit Pathak argues that such a notion of nationalism depicts the ideological state apparatus of the state, which asks universities to conform to hyper-nationalism and not ask questions in order to be safe. (Apoorvanand, 2018; Pathak, 2021)

Avijit Pathak further argues that religious nationalism represses alternative voices often coming from the student community. These alternative voices question the hegemonic nature of nationalism. The market-oriented technology-based education, and religious nationalism become suspicious of the critical perspectives emanating from liberal education. The interrogations by the alternative voices are seen as a threat by dominant ideologies because it questions their power position. This threat is reflected in attacking and calling university students anti-national. (Pathak, 2019)

Online education has been favored even before the pandemic. Importance has been given to ICTs and MOOCs where universities naturalize the idea of online education and misappropriate the concept of democratic access. With the rise of e-learning spaces, surveillance can be applied in the garb of 'recording' classes, and such recorded lectures would be seen as the source of 'knowledge'. This managerial and surveillance-based idea of education depicts a diminishing role of public universities in India (Arunima, 2017).

The above discussion gives a glimpse of the higher education scenario, Indian higher education has been facing problems even before the pandemic occurred. It can be seen that universities in India are already in a difficult situation because of the influence of the dominant ideologies that see universities as the problem. The challenges that the pandemic brings do not situate themselves on a clean slate but on already existing problematic situations. Additionally, it is not with the pandemic that online education has been favored but it has been favored before as well. To make better sense of this situation, the next session discusses the higher education scenario during the pandemic.

Higher Education During Pandemic

This section examines the challenges faced by university students during the pandemic. The sudden and unplanned transition of educational space from the physical classroom to the online classroom raises the question: What is the aim of education? Scholars claim that the sudden and sole reliance on online education hints at the commercialization, marketization and privatization of education, where the focus is solely on transacting education. In such a case, online education becomes a commodity that has to be transacted by the producer (teachers) with the buyer (students).

In this scenario, students from disadvantaged backgrounds find it difficult to afford internet connectivity, get access to smartphones or laptops and face difficulty in engaging in online education. The pressure of not being able to participate in online classes has led to a rise in suicides. Koshy (2020) notes that approximately 2.5 lakh students in Kerala do not have access to TV, or smartphones and are not able to join online classes. Students who are deprived of access to online education mostly belong to marginalized communities.

This is reflected in The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2019, where it is depicted that there is a global gender gap in owning a mobile and accessing the internet. The highest gap is witnessed in the Global South, whereas compared to men, women are 28% and 58% less likely to own a mobile and access the mobile internet, respectively. India reports 26% and 56% respectively.

Saumyajit Bhattacharya (2020), in *What Is So Wrong with Online Teaching?* articulates that the availability of the internet does not directly translate to access to education. It has to be considered that a mobile is not an ideal device for online lectures as its screen is small, and using it for longer durations can be more harmful than beneficial. Also, the mobile or a laptop may be unavailable for the required duration if there is more than one student at home, or if the device owner needs it.

Such an analysis questions the very nature of knowledge production through the virtual mode of education. The online mode of education creates a digital divide which causes a knowledge divide (Shah, 2020). The knowledge divide highlights the challenges of accessibility and equity in online education. The knowledge divide surfaces the problem

of asymmetry of access and exclusivity in pedagogy, where only a few students can access online education. Secondly, it is important to ask whether students who access online education are able to have critical engagements. The politics of the pandemic which affected the world disproportionately, exercises similar inequity through online education.

Furthermore, patriarchal structures produce an added disadvantage on women, requiring them to be the caretakers in the house. The globalized world gives utmost importance to productivity, denying women the space to breathe. They are supposed to juggle their responsibilities in the house along with their education. As the university campuses and classrooms have virtually entered their homes, there is no sense of a divide between private and public life. The university space which earlier allowed female students to be away from domestic constraints has now entered the domestic space. Even though there is a promise that education can give an equal space for students to learn and grow, it was challenged during the pandemic. The equality that a university campus provided (the extent of this equality is questionable), has visibly reduced in the virtual version of the university. The intensity of the situation has to be understood in the context of increased gender-based violence during the pandemic where women are supposed to live with their abusers (Anureet, 2020; Bhattacharya, 2020). The pandemic has overburdened female students and has disproportionately affected them. The gendered dimensions of technical advancements do not guarantee fair access to knowledge. Thus, it leads to creating new forms of 'othering' in education for women. It is not to say that these 'otherings' were not present before, but they have become more prominent now with the closure of physical university spaces.

The universities created a complete dependence on online education by closing campuses without considering the status of students from different socio-economic backgrounds. It seemed that universities visualized the student community as a homogeneous category that is privileged. The voices, in forms of newspaper reports, complaints in university email chains, etc, coming from the margins were silenced and ignored. However, this act of silencing and not hearing alternative voices is not new. Such violence is a function of a hegemonic, Hindu nationalist, and market-oriented university where students are attacked. It is difficult to imagine democratic education from exclusionary education spaces. In this context, perhaps, instead of trying to continue education, educational practices such as exams and online classes could have been halted. When the pandemic attacked the whole world, students had to sit for exams and attend online classes.

Assumptions About University Students

All the above-discussed articulations reflect that universities seem to implicitly have made certain assumptions to ask everyone to go online suddenly. One assumption seems to be that the student community is homogeneous. It also seems that the universities assume that home is a safe space without any violence and with ample privacy where students can freely study. The universities also assume that all students can access online education

equally with a good internet connection, and study online material for long hours without disruptions. The universities also assume that students do not contribute to household chores, and they don't take into how account how being engaged in household work could deprive them of the required time and space to pay attention to online classes and exams. Such assumptions depoliticize the nature of online education. These assumptions reflect how universities are turning their back on complexities such as caste, class, and gender issues of students.

Limitations

This article does not focus minutely on different marginalized groups and include their experiences of the pandemic and online education. It does not discuss what different roles the university undertook during the pandemic and how they shaped the experiences and aspirations of the university students. It does not address the experiences of teachers who also faced challenges during this shift to online education. Further research can explore the experiences of different stakeholders such as teachers, parents or guardians and administration. Further research can focus on policy implications and analyze the policy shifts in education, in general, and online education, in particular.

Concluding Remarks

It can be concluded that this article raises questions about the role of universities in India during the pandemic period. This article analyzes the implications of the sudden shutting down of universities and complete reliance on online education. It is observed that complete and sudden reliance on online education has benefited some but drastically affected many university students, particularly students from marginalized communities. There have been pre-existing inequalities and challenges in higher education, and the pandemic has exacerbated them. Universities were already struggling with the attacks of privatization and hegemonic nationalism. The pandemic created new layers of challenges of access and equity in university spaces. The structural inequalities of the universities have been brought to the surface with the emergence of the pandemic. There has been rampant exclusion due to a lack of digital infrastructure. Thus, online education cannot be seen as a better alternative to physical classroom spaces. Instead of online education, no education could have been opted for the time being. If not that, then atleast online exams and assessments could have been stopped or postponed as it seems unethical and insensitive to ask students to sit for exams when the whole world is dealing with the pandemic. It seems that online education has not been successful in implementing inclusion and equality in Indian higher education. However, it can be used as a support tool along with physical classrooms. As times are changing, student and teacher experiences must be taken into account before continuing with the total reliance on online education ♦

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