

Learning in the Lockdown: Perspectives from a JJ cluster in Delhi

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Introduction

No single event in recent history has been as unanticipated, calamitous, and overwhelming in terms of the devastation and disruption it has caused in almost all spheres of life all over the world, as the Covid-19 pandemic. Almost no industry, sector, or sphere of life has remained untouched by Covid-19, especially because of the lengthy 'lockdowns' imposed by different local and national governments. In this context, education in India has been one of the most crucial and significant domains that first experienced a near-complete standstill, and has since been undergoing a massive reorientation with technology emerging as the driving force behind a reimagination of what education looks like. While this has given a huge boost to various education-technology (ed-tech) related businesses, it has also laid bare the huge inequalities India faces in terms of access to technology and education.

Even before the March 2020 Covid-19 induced lockdown, education was far from being a level playing field. Education in India is characterized by sharp inequalities, and at the same time, it has also provided a context for deeply contested debates regarding the meaning and purpose of education itself, which includes questions such as who should deliver it, what should be offered as content, and what is the relationship between education and society. There is also a crucial need to focus on the education of the marginalized and socially vulnerable groups in India, along with a need to understand how the learning experiences of children are shaped by the larger structural and organizational factors. Further, as urban populations continue to rise in India and the world, along with the increasing concentration of poverty in urban areas, it becomes important to understand the perspectives of those

living in urban poverty in order to fully understand the context surrounding education for socio-economically marginalized populations.

In this regard, Delhi offers itself as an ideal site for the study of the various questions related to the shaping of education for the urban poor. Delhi is one of the largest cities in India with a population of more than 167 lakhs (Census, 2011) and according to data collated from the 69th round of the National Sample Survey, approximately 10.2 lakh households live in areas that are designated as ‘slums’ within the urban areas of Delhi (Directorate of Economics & Statistics, 2015). Further, Delhi has witnessed a sudden and sustained increase in government expenditure and involvement in education since the year 2015. It is thus relevant to understand whether this increased expenditure has percolated down to the socially and economically marginalized sections of the population. Moreover, understanding the perspective of those living in urban poverty becomes even more essential in the current scenario where physical schools have been closed for almost two years and almost all educational processes have shifted online.

With this in mind, the current study focuses on a *Jhuggi Jhopri* (JJ) Cluster in East Delhi. One of the objectives of the study has been to understand the impact of the Covid-19 induced school closure in terms of the schooling experiences of those living in urban poverty. The study also explores how far systems of online learning reach the lowest levels of social and economic hierarchies.

Online Classes

Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, India has witnessed one of the longest school closures across the world (Murali & Maiorano, 2021). In fact, in Delhi, the closing of all educational institutions was announced on 12, March 2020, almost two weeks before the first nationwide lockdown was announced on 25, March 2020. While the strict nationwide lockdown started to be eased after a period of two months, schools, especially for classes 1-8 remained closed for over one and a half years and were only reopened in November 2021.

With such a prolonged period of school closure, schools across the city and the country shifted to an online mode of education. However, the term ‘online classes’ has meant very different things for students living in urban poverty, depending on the class they study in and the kind of school they attend. In the JJ cluster where this study is based, the different schools attended by students included primary schools run by the East Delhi Municipal Corporation (EDMC), secondary schools run by the Delhi Government, “elite” government schools such as Kendriya Vidyalaya and the Delhi Government’s School of Excellence (which has now been converted into School of Specialized Excellence), and some private schools.

For most of the students studying in classes one to eight in government schools, the parents stated that no online classes involving any kind of video interaction were held.

For these students, online education simply meant being a part of WhatsApp groups for different subjects and getting daily or weekly worksheets. Students were expected to solve these worksheets and send back pictures of the solved worksheets to their teachers through WhatsApp. However, the situation was found to be somewhat different for those studying in government schools such as the Delhi Government's flagship School of Excellence or the Kendriya Vidyalaya run by the Central Government. The children from the JJ cluster attending these schools had regular online classes with video interactions with their teachers and classmates, along with getting regular worksheets. This was also the case with children studying in private schools. During our interactions, a parent of a child studying in a neighboring private school under the EWS/DG (Economically Weaker Section/ Disadvantaged Group) category recounted that regular online classes were held with attendance being marked in every class for every child. The parent also stated that the teachers were concerned about every child attending classes and would inquire in detail if their child missed even a single class. There was, thus, found to be a very clear distinction between the kind of classes held for children in different schools.

However, across the board, all the parents that were interviewed unanimously agreed that studying at home was not adequate for their children. Even though many parents were uneducated themselves, they could tell that their children had suffered significant learning losses over the last two years. Moreover, though their children had been promoted to higher classes at the end of the academic year, the parents believed that their children had not actually learned much during the period of school closure.

Even those parents whose children had regular video interactions and classes stated that their children often copied the answers to their worksheets from one another, or older children solved them for their younger siblings and friends. Even when tests and exams were conducted, parents stated that children did not take them seriously and asked their parents or friends for help and rarely solved them on their own. Overall, all the parents that were interviewed stated that schooling provided a regular schedule for children and kept them busy the whole day with regular homework, assessments, and exams. Studying from home, even for those having regular video classes, was far from adequate as children got distracted easily and hardly spent any time on focused studying.

Such findings not only throw light on the actual experience of online education for those living in urban poverty but also help to explain the data that has been reported in other studies on the learning experiences of children during the pandemic. One such study is the SCHOOL (School Children's Online and Offline Learning) Survey 2021, conducted across underprivileged households in urban and rural areas in India. The survey reported that in urban areas, where people are generally assumed to be better connected with technological facilities, the percentage of surveyed children studying online regularly was only 24%. Those not studying at all were 19% and the percentage of parents who felt that their child's reading abilities had declined was as high as 76%. The report also points out that the extended school closure has effectively created a four year learning deficit in many children as those who were in Class 3 when schools were closed, are now in Class 5 but with the reading ability of students in Class 1 (The SCHOOL Team, 2021).

Along with alarming declines in reading and writing abilities, other reports have pointed out that there has also been a substantial increase in the number of dropouts among those belonging to disadvantaged communities, with the number of children being out of school increasing significantly in the younger age groups (Murali & Maiorano, 2021). Thus, a stark contrast is visible between children from privileged households who have continued their education smoothly through the online mode, and those from underprivileged households who have been struggling to access online education.

Access To Digital Technology

Access to digital technologies is a crucial dimension of online education. For all forms of online education, from WhatsApp groups to video lectures through videoconferencing platforms, the digital infrastructure that can support these technologies is a prerequisite. Such digital infrastructure includes a stable electricity connection, devices such as smartphones, laptops, or personal computers, and ongoing access to internet services. Moreover, access to the digital technologies associated with online education also requires the ability to navigate through various digital interfaces, a difficult process for the uneducated or first time users of such technologies. Though urban areas are generally thought to have better technological facilities, the reach of such facilities to poor and marginalized groups leaves much to be desired.

In the JJ cluster in question, most of the interviewed households stated that they had only one smartphone. Most families could also not afford to buy more than one smartphone which caused problems where households have many school-going children in different classes, who require the phone at the same time. Households that already had a smartphone before the lockdown reported that the phone was used by the working adult (usually the father). Hence, it was available for the children to attend online classes only after he returned home from work. Children could thus access the study materials sent on the phone only in the evening or night. Even where schools were undertaking online, video-based classes, such issues made it difficult for students to actually attend these.

Many households reported that they had to spend on smartphones, internet connectivity, and on frequent repairs to these devices, despite suffering unemployment and income loss at the same time. Even though at least one smartphone was available in all the interviewed households, very few children could attend online, video-based classes regularly, and most children had to be content with sending and receiving worksheets through WhatsApp.

These findings provide a glimpse of the poor access to digital technology, reported from across the country. According to the 75th round of the National Sample Survey (NSS) for 2017-18, from the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MOSPI), only 24% Indians owned a smartphone and only 11% households possessed any digital device such as laptops, desktops, tablets, palmtops, or such handheld devices (MOSPI, 2018). The report also states that only 8% households having children aged 5-24 years had a computer with internet connectivity.

Thus, the level of access to digital technologies was already extremely low before the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, in households with children enrolled in schools or colleges. Given this, the complete shift of education to an online mode has exacerbated the educational inequalities in our country. Those belonging to economically and socially disadvantaged communities have had to bear the brunt of prolonged school closures, as they are the ones who have mostly remained cut-off from any meaningful teaching-learning activities for almost two years.

Conclusion

Apart from the direct impact on the health and livelihoods of individuals, the pandemic has seriously affected the education sector as well. With India having one of the longest periods of school closures across the world, students and teachers have had to learn the intricacies of online education almost overnight. While this process has been fraught with problems everywhere, it is those living in marginalized communities that have invariably got the rawest deal.

The interviews conducted among households in a JJ cluster in East Delhi reveal that there are large variations in the kind of education available to students under the label of 'online classes'. While those better resourced private, State, and Central Government schools have had regular video-based classes, those in municipal primary schools and other government schools have received only WhatsApp based worksheets for almost two years. However, all parents interviewed, felt that their children had lost crucial years of their education because of school closures.

School closures have starkly revealed the digital divide that already existed in the country. The digital divide has caused the deepening of existing educational inequalities as those belonging to economically and socially disadvantaged communities that have the least access to digital technologies such as phones, computers, and the internet, and have received a raw deal in the name of online education.

It is also important to consider that most parents in urban slums and JJ clusters of Delhi are not educated, hence their children are highly dependent on schools for their formal education. Under such circumstances, school closures have caused significant learning losses for these children, as the experience of online education has been severely limited for them. Further, given the recurrence of various waves of the pandemic, which then cause recurrent school closures, it is vitally important for policy makers to rethink the current model of online education in order to make it more inclusive and to ensure that no child is left behind. It is also important to consider the extent of school closure and assess its risks vis-a-vis the harms of school closure.

The 21st century is witnessing continuous technological advancements, and it is not surprising that technological solutions are being sought for problems in all sectors, including

education. However, as ed-tech companies grow and new forms of online education emerge, it is critical to consider the experiences of children from socio-economically disadvantaged communities. For these children, even after two years of online education, there remain serious deficits in terms of access to digital technologies and infrastructure, and actual learning through online modes of education ♦

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