PANDEMIC AND CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION:THE FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

"Education is the most powerful weapon, which you can use to change the world" On March 11, 2020, The World Health Organization declared the coronavirus as a global pandemic. With very little known about the treatment and no vaccination available, this contagious disease caused worldwide havoc. By far this virus has shaken 200 countries and has caused more than 4 million deaths all over the world. With every country in this world fighting tooth and nail to survive, economies have taken a big hit. A lot of industries have suffered a massive recession due to forced or voluntary containment but some sectors were positively impacted. One such field in Education.

The Education sector is one of the most revolutionized arenas, India's education sector offers a great opportunity with approximately 29 percent of India's population between the age group 0 to 14 years. We have over 250 million school-going students, more than any other country. It also has one of the largest networks of higher education institutions in the world. There are 993 Universities, 39931 Colleges, and 10725 Stand Alone Institutions listed on the AISHE(All India Survey on Higher Education) web portal and out of these 962 Universities, 38179 Colleges and 9190 Stand Alone Institutions have responded during the survey. 298 Universities are affiliating i.e. having Colleges.

Coronavirus has affected the education system, with the advent of lockdown schools & colleges were closed from the last week of March with no near dates of opening again. All major entrance examinations were postponed including engineering, medical, law, agriculture, fashion, etc. Another major concern became the paying capacity of several institutions, the frequency of pay-cut and delay in credits increased. Student counselling operations have been affected, institutions had also paused the faculty hiring plans for existing vacancies. It disrupted the entire structure of schooling and learning including teaching and assessment methodologies.

The sector has undergone prominent changes throughout the periods of educational history, it has outgrown from the systems of Gurukuls to a school with chalkboards to smart classes, and now the sudden need for online classes. Technology has always been an important factor in the evolution of this sector, new areas of specialization emerged with modernization and globalization. The pace of growth is proportional to the standards of the society, however, the sudden shift to computers and digital methods brought their share of hardships. Some private schools could adopt online teaching methods but low-income private and government schools were unable to shift suddenly without appropriate government support. Such institutions were shut down with little or no access to e-learning solutions.

Higher education is also disoriented which will in return impact the country's economic future. Umpteen students also planned for admissions abroad in countries like the US, UK, Australia, China, etc. All the countries went into lockdown delaying the entire process, students who were already registered suffered issues due to the time difference. All the universities in the country postponed the examinations, creating a disturbance in students' course cycle, especially the final years. Another major concern amongst the graduating batch of 2020 is employment. Students who have completed their degrees had relatively fewer job offers from the corporate sector due to the pandemic. Many major employers from the industries affected like automobiles or consultancy paused their hirings indefinitely. There is no denying the fact that the lockdown also provided the education sector with new ideas to impart knowledge. The government took many initiatives with an understanding of the necessity to explore digital learning platforms.

It launched the SWAYAM platform to provide quality educational content via Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). Students stuck at home preparing for JEE and NEET and other competitive exams also used this for their benefit. A group of 32 channels called Swayam Prabha is telecasting high-quality educational programs, 24×7, using the GSAT-15 satellite. NPTEL, IITs, UGC, CEC, IGNOU, NCERT, NIOS, and all such major organizations are providing content for this project. The objectives of these government initiatives were to fulfil these interrelated goals:

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1. Creating Safe Spaces- Learning cannot take place in a disruptive environment. For many students, the inability to go to school means staying back in their house unable to focus which leads to loss of education, finally resulting in uneducated and less productive human resources. The government is working on the implementation of more targeted social safety nets, welfare and protection schemes, and the easy availability of counselling services to those in need.

2. Supporting access to online education -. Union HRD Minister Dr. Ramesh Pokhriyal had urged the students to utilize the digital learning platforms to their full potential. NROER(National Repository of Open Education Resources) was an excellent initiative in this direction which enables the use of E-libraries, E-Courses and also provides a chance to participate in events online and theme-based education. The teachers can also enrol in NROER and learn more about the topics that are taught in the classroom.

3. Infrastructure capacity building- With pandemic-related job losses and subsequent lack of income, many poor families might pull their children out of school. For families that choose to support their children's education even in these trying times, a lack of access to infrastructure may be detrimental to their children's learning. A glance at statistics of the reach of AM and FM radio, and television and Internet penetration rates shows the progress these services have made in India over the years. The government's digital platforms using these services have become a critical source in infrastructural capacity building.

4. Mental Health facilities- Before the pandemic, government actions were more inclined towards increasing knowledge of the students but they have begun to consider the importance of mental and emotional stability. The central government is restructuring the Indian education system focusing on the overall development of students.

The Covid-19 pandemic has driven the government, policymakers, and educators to innovate and implement dynamic digital learning initiatives, and encouraged students and their families to access and familiarize themselves with these new forms of learning. If the future is to be powered digitally, this challenging moment in history should be taken as a powerful step to rethink and revamp the country's education sector and propel the country's youth forward to take on a post-pandemic world. The government's New Education policy seems to be a step forward towards the comprehensive growth of students. As per the statistics the NEP 2020 was formulated after considering over 2 lakh suggestions from different levels of local self-bodies, 2.5 lakh gram panchayats, 6,600 blocks, 6,000 ULBs (Urban Local Bodi and 676 districts with the aim of overall productivity and contributing citizens for building a society which is equal and inclusive and also has an increased Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) of 50% by 2035. It is a significant shift from the 1986 policy, which promoted a 10+2 structure of school education, the new NEP pitches for a "5+3+3+4" design corresponding to the age groups 3-8 years (foundational stage), 8-11 (preparatory), 11-14 (middle), and 14-18 (secondary).

It is a gospel truth that the social and economic impact of Covid-19 has been severe. But there are a lot of steps that can help soften the blow and put ourselves in a better situation for the long term. Education particularly has an important role to play in this journey to recovery. It has now become inescapable to add digital tools to provide educational content to the students. The Indian Govt. and different stakeholders of education have explored the possibility of Open and Distance learning to increase digital deployment. India is not completely equipped to make education reach every nook and corner of the nation via digital platforms. Underprivileged students will suffer due to the present choice of digital platforms. But universities and the government are relentlessly trying to come up with a solution to resolve this problem, trying everything from d2h channels to mobile applications. We should have a long-term plan and adopt behavioural changes for this crisis. There is an urgent need to take efforts on the maximum utilization of online platforms so that students not only complete their degree in this academic year but also get ready for the future digital-oriented environment. There is a necessity of a transition period strategy that will ensure that all children must have sustainable access to learning post-pandemic. This should also include creative strategies to involve various individuals from diverse backgrounds, including remote regions, marginalized, and minority groups, for effective education delivery. As the online practice is benefitting the students immensely, it should be continued after the lockdown. Sustainability can be achieved through the proper implantation of discussed strategies.

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