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A Comparative Study of School Education in India: Pre-Covid vs. Post Covid Era

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Abstract:
The pandemic caused shocks to the system with schools forced to shut down during the lockdown period, and the transition of students and teachers to online teaching-learning. There are both positive and negative consequences of pandemic on the education system. The current study aims to provide a comprehensive examination of the state of school education in India before and after the Covid-19 pandemic. The main objective of the study is to explore various dimensions, including student's enrolment, academic performance, and government policies, to understand the evolving landscape of school education in the wake of the pandemic. The study is descriptive in nature, and it is based on secondary data. This paper highlights the enrolment and learning outcomes of school students in India and also some measures taken by the Government of India to provide education to all.

Keywords: Education, COVID-19, Teaching, Enrolment

Introduction

The pandemic Covid-19 was spread all over the world which led the world to an unfamiliar health crisis. It affected various aspects of the society including the education sector also. The development of any nation is impossible without education. So, there is a need to assess its impact on the education sector. According to UNESCO report, it affected more than 90% of the total world's student population during mid-april 2020. In India, more than 32 crore of students have been affected by the various restrictions and lockdown imposed for covid-19. The UNESCO report stated that following Uganda, India experienced the longest school closures resulting from Covid-19 pandemic (UNESCO, 2020). With the closure of educational institutions, the need for a rapid transition from physical learning to the digital sphere of learning has emerged. But only a handful of schools could adopt such methods and the low-income private and government schools were quite inefficient to adopt the same, thus resulting in a shutdown. Educational institutions in India are based on traditional method of learning, that is, they follow the traditional set up of face-to-face lectures in the classrooms. When schools had to close their regular classrooms, they had to quickly start using online teaching methods. This made the existing differences in access to digital tools more noticeable. As we move into the time after Covid, school education have changed a lot. One big difference is how we learn. Many schools now use computers and the internet for classes. This period of transition also demands a critical examination of various changes happening in school education. Understanding the transformative impact of this pandemic on the education sector is crucial for adapting to the evolving needs of learners, educators, and the education system as a whole and making sure education in India gets stronger, includes everyone, and adapts well to the needs of a changing society

Objectives

The main objectives of this study are –

i. To assess the enrolment level in school pre and post Covid-19 in rural India.
ii. To examine the learning outcomes in pre and post Covid-19 in rural India.
iii. To explore the various measures taken by Indian government during and post Covid-19 for school education in India

Methodology

The study primarily relies on secondary sources, like including reports from national and international agencies, academic journals, and relevant articles. Special attention is given to journals and e-contents that specifically address the impact of COVID-19 on educational systems. Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) is major source of this study. It is noteworthy that ASER only covers rural districts.

The study is analysed for the period from 2018-2022. The study will do a comparison of school education system of post pandemic period (2022) and before pandemic (2018).

Significance

The study will comprehensively explore and understand the impacts of Covid 19 on the school education in India. The study will explore various dimensions, including academic performance, teaching methods, and government policies, to understand the evolving landscape of education in the wake of the pandemic. The study's findings can aid long-term planning for educational resilience and preparedness for future crises. Lessons learned from the pandemic can guide the development of robust and flexible education systems.

Findings

COVID-19 and Education

During the lockdown, educational institutions were encouraged to continue online education. To provide digital education, online platforms used were Google Classroom, Zoom, Google Meet, and etc. (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). This compelled many educational institutions to cancel their classes, examinations, etc. and to choose the online modes. Some schools and colleges that didn't want to change before have now been forced to shift to online teaching and learning. It was a challenge for the teachers in India to adapt to the digital mode of learning in no time. There were other challenges also like lack of skills, technical knowledge and training among teachers, lack of preparation time for the development of e-content and non-suitability of certain courses for online teaching (Gratz & Looney, 2020). Furthermore, internet connectivity, attendance issues of students, lack of engagement and participation were also limiting the access to digital education (Shelley & Ashish, 2020). Online education is not an option for all as only one in four children has access to digital devices and internet connectivity in India (UNICEF). Only 23.8 percent of the Indian households had access to internet (NSSO, 2018). In a country where such proportion of households don't have access to a smart device and internet, schools resorting to online learning has led to a major share of kids being left out.

After the end of covid-19, most schools are back open but education is still in recovery. Due to Covid 19, many students were not enrolled in schools as many families faced economic hardships, with job losses and financial instability. The ASER report 2021 found that one in every three children enrolled in classes 1 and 2 had never attended in-person classes. 80.5% of enrolled children had textbook for their current grade. 19.5% of enrolled children had no availability of textbooks for their current grade. For children in the age group of 6-14, enrolment in private schools decreased from 32.5% in 2018 to 24.4% in 2021. While more than 67.6% of enrolled children possessed a smartphone at home, a significant portion, totalling 26.1%, lacked access to it (ASER, 2021). This data underscores the complex challenges the education system faced in the COVID-19 era. The comparative study of school education in India, taking into account the pre-COVID and post-COVID eras, will provide valuable insights into the changes occurred in the school education system.

Enrolment level

Enrolment levels in schools reflect the number of students currently enrolled in educational programs within a particular institution, district, or region. These are affected by many socio-economic factors like income

level, demographic shifts, migration patterns, changes in birth rates and etc. COVID-19 pandemic disrupted education systems worldwide, leading to fluctuations in enrollment levels. To evaluate the change in enrolment rates due to covid-19, data of ASER 2018 and ASER 2022 is compared in table 1.

Table 1- Enrolment in India of age group 6-14 year

School	**ASER 2018**	**ASER 2022**
Govt enrolled	65.6%	72.9%
Private	30.9%	25.1%
Other	0.7	0.5%
Total	97.2%	98.5%

Source- ASER, 2018, 2022

Table 1 shows compared enrolment figures of 2018 and 2022. It can be seen that the overall enrolment rate has slightly increased, reflecting a marginal improvement in school enrolment across all categories. Government enrolment has significantly increased, indicating a positive trend in students opting for government schools. Private enrolment has decreased, suggesting a shift towards government schools or other educational avenues. So, only 2.8% were not enrolled in school in 2018 and 1.5% of 6-14 year children were not enrolled in 2022. These findings highlight the changing landscape of school enrolment in India due to economic stress of pandemic period, with a notable shift towards government schools and a slight increase in overall enrolment rates.

Learning Outcomes

During covid-19, due to school closures and transition to remote learning, students faced learning disruptions in education. The transition to remote and hybrid learning environments forced students to adapt to new modes of instruction, requiring them to navigate digital platforms. Many students lacked access to digital learning and textbooks also. So it is required to get an insight into the effect of all these factors on learning outcomes of school students in India.

Table 2- Children in Grade V to VIII who can do basic arithmetic

Grade	**% Children who can do division**		**% Children who can subtract**	
	2018	**2022**	**2018**	**2022**
1	2.0	1.7	3.9	4.1
2	3.8	3.9	10.6	10.1
3	8.5	8.3	19.6	17.6
4	17.6	15.9	24.6	22.9
5	27.8	25.6	24.5	24.3
6	34.7	31.7	24.0	24.9
7	39.0	37.8	24.0	24.7
8	43.9	44.6	22.1	23.1

Source- ASER, 2018, 2022

The table 2 shows a comparative analysis of the percentage of children in different grades who can perform division and subtraction in 2018 and 2022. Overall, there is a slight decline in the percentage of children proficient in division across all grades from 2018 to 2022. Conversely, the percentage of children who can subtract has remained relatively stable or slightly improved. Grade 8 stands out with a noticeable increase in the percentage of children proficient in both division and subtraction from 2018 to 2022. The findings suggest a need for targeted interventions to enhance mathematical skills, especially in higher grades, while acknowledging positive trends in grade 8.

Table 3- Children in Grade 1 to 8 and their reading level

Grade	% Children who can read a word		% Children who can read Grade II level text	
	2018	2022	2018	2022
1	13.7	12.7	5.8	1.5
2	21.3	32.7	14.7	5.0
3	20.8	36.2	27.2	10.4
4	16.6	28.6	40.7	23.2
5	13.0	21.8	50.3	36.4
6	10.5	16.0	59.8	47.4
7	8.3	12.9	67.7	56.3
8	6.7	9.2	72.8	66.4

Source- ASER, 2018, 2022

The table 3 shows that over the years from 2018 to 2022, there has been a notable improvement in the percentage of children who can read both individual words and Grade II level text across different grades in the table. For example, in Grade 1, the percentage of children who can read a word decreased slightly from 13.7% in 2018 to 12.7% in 2022, while the ability to read Grade II level text significantly improved from 5.8% to 1.5%. This pattern of improvement is consistent across higher grades, indicating positive trends in reading proficiency among students over the specified period.

Initiatives by Government of India

To address the challenge of remote learning, MHRD took several initiatives to assist students, scholars, teachers and learners to pursue their education. Some of the key initiatives are-

1) **DIKSHA (Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing) -** It is the nation's digital infrastructure for providing quality e-content for school education in states/UTs and QR coded textbooks for all grades are available on it.
2) **SWAYAM Prabha TV Channels-** These are meant for those who do not have access to the internet. MHRD dedicated 32 channels to broadcast high-quality educational programs.
3) **E-Pathshala-** The E-textbooks can be accessed using e-pathshala web portal and applications. It provides access to digital textbooks for teachers, students, parents, researchers and educators.
4) **National Repository of Open Educational Resources-** It is an open storehouse of e-content for students, teachers, teacher educators and parents. It is a solution developed to address the challenges faced by the education sector of our country.
5) **PM e-VIDYA-** This was launched by Ministry of Education as part of the Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan in 2020. It includes DIKSHA platform, online courses, and the SWAYAM initiative to promote digital education and enhance the accessibility of learning resources across the country.
6) **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020**- It was launched with the aim to revolutionize the education system by emphasizing holistic learning, skill development, and a flexible curriculum. It emphasizes the integration of technology in education to enhance learning outcomes.
7) **Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) -** It aims to provide quality education from class 6th to 12th to the students of ST (Scheduled Tribe) category in remote areas.
8) **Operation Digital Board (ODB) -** It is a government initiative aimed at transforming traditional classrooms into technologically advanced learning environments. Under this program, interactive

digital boards are introduced in schools, fostering a more engaging and interactive educational experience.

Suggestions:

- India should adept to modern technologies in education.
- Advocate for a more flexible and adaptable curriculum.
- Explore alternative assessment methods that go beyond traditional exams, placing emphasis on project-based assessments, skill demonstrations, and continuous evaluation.
- India should develop strategies to ensure that all children must have access to learning.
- Budget for education sector should be increased.
- Encourage and fund research initiatives that explore innovative teaching methods, technologies, and educational models.

Conclusion

In this study, our findings show that Covid-19 has impacted immensely to the education sector of India. Covid made us use more technology for learning, like online classes. But not everyone could access it easily. We observed shifts in enrolment levels and learning outcomes, highlighting the profound impact of the pandemic on the education landscape. The findings underscore the importance of adapting educational strategies to address the challenges brought about by the global health crisis. Moving forward, it is crucial for policymakers and educators to consider the insights from this comparative study to formulate effective and inclusive approaches that enhance enrolment rates and improve learning outcomes in the evolving educational environment.

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