Changing Paradigms in Higher Education in India: An Assessment of COVID-19 Scenario

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Abstract

COVID-19 has impacted the entire world. Each and every sector of society has been affected in the ways unprecedented. Education sector has also been affected tremendously. Students have suffered immensely during the lockdown time and their struggles are still ongoing. Corona times have brought a big transformation in our lifestyles, consequently also in teaching-learning pedagogy throughout the world. While everybody adapted to the demands of time, yet we all went through harrowing times and are still coping with it but with a sense of discomfort. In these testing times students of all grades and sections had to face multiple hardships specific to their age and personal situation. In this paper an overview of teaching-learning scenario in higher education will be delineated. The focus of the paper will be to shed light on the changing paradigms of education in the Higher Education sector in India. Challenges and changes posed to the teachers and students will be measured and mapped in the paper.

Key Words: Higher Education, Teaching-Learning Pedagogy, COVID-19, Youth

Introduction:

The very outset of the year 2020 brought something very unexpected and unprecedented- the COVID-19. And we were all caught unguarded, unprepared and exposed vulnerably to this sudden calamity which fell like a thud upon us. From health system to education system, from travel to businesses, from socializing to recreation all fell still. For the first time we all were together, connected by a virus, despite of our differences of race, gender, class, nationalities, cast, creed, culture and alike. From Wuhan to India, from Italy to Iran, from England to Australia, each and every nook and corner of this world was affected severely. The COVID-19 pandemic wrecked all nations and all people in different ways and manners, each individual to its own type and group. Some fared bit better than others and many succumbed to devastation due to the various reasons. Therefore, "it is necessary for the international community to recognize that the consequences of school (College and University too) closures tend to have the greatest impact on the most vulnerable and marginalized students, especially in countries with significant pre-existing gaps in their education systems" (Group ORD 8). Thus, in this paper the focus will be on India's Higher Education sector.

Youth of India is its asset, as India is one of the youngest countries in this world. As per a study, "the population in the age- group of 15-34 increased from 353 million in 2002 to 430 million in 2011. Current predictions suggest a steady increase in the young population to 464 million by 2021"(The Hindu, 17 April 2011). Now when most of our young people studying in colleges and

universities were on the deciding and important phases of their lives and were on the verge of completing their studies, preparing for examinations for securing jobs, exploring ventures abroad, trying to find a niche for themselves - Coronavirus comes crashing like a demon. It not only led to haywire situation in the health sector but education sector also suffered tremendous losses due to corona. We all could and did witness health related extreme and heart-rending emergencies on media but the silent and slow killing of dreams of millions of young people went a little unnoticed. On one side youth was fighting psychological trauma of losing parents and grandparents and on the other side the education scenario was all in chaos. Despite of online measures and methods, millions of young college and university students of the country suffered immense setback. In the ensuing pages of this paper, light will be shed on the challenges that Higher Education sector is facing in order to rehabilitate the students back again into the system. The paper will also ponder upon the strategies that may be employed so that the big blocks like 'Digital divide' do not become hurdle for many deserving but unresourceful young brilliant minds of our country.

Methodology: The paper is based on observation on social media, day to day life in the neighbourhood and the online study based on various Survey reports like Govt. Survey Reports, UNESCO and WHO Reports published from time to time. The paper is divided into two sections. Section A will assess the Challenges and Situation, Section B will focus on suggestions and methods in light of the challenges underlined in the previous section.

Section A: Challenges posed to Indian Higher Education in the Covid Scenario:

In a heterogenous and huge country like India, the challenges are as diverse as diverse is its demographic fabric. A study states that the "top 10% of the Indian population holds 77% of the total national wealth. 73% of the wealth generated in 2017 went to the richest 1%, while 67 million Indians who comprise the poorest half of the population saw only a 1% increase in their wealth" (Blog by Prof. Himanshu: *Oxfam International*). Truly is asserted in the same write-up by Prof Himanshu from Jawaharlal Nehru University that "while India is one of the fastest growing economies in the world, it is also one of the most unequal countries" (*Oxfam International*). Now the country which was already reeling with this level of stark disparity, it is not hard to imagine the plight of poor daily wage earners and small scale business owners under the lockdown, apparently it is easy to estimate the plunder that this pandemic has incurred especially to the young members of the affected and unresourceful families. When two square meals become a major issue of life, it is a foolish and illogical to assume that 'online' teaching will be reaching these disadvantaged million young students. Let us look into the situation more closely because "this crisis has exposed the many inadequacies and inequities in our education systems – from access to the broadband and computers needed for online education, and the supportive environments needed to focus on learning, up to the misalignment between resources and needs" (Schleicher 4).

Digital divide in the country is a hard to ignore reality which is like a gaping wound for Indian Higher Education system. Online

education is seems like a cruel joke on millions of poor young students. "According to the Key Indicators of Household Social Consumption on Education in India report, based on the 2017-18 National Sample Survey, less than 15% of rural Indian households have Internet (as opposed to 42% urban Indian households). A mere 13% of people surveyed (aged above five) in rural areas — just 8.5% of females — could use the Internet. The poorest households cannot afford a smartphone or a computer (The Indian Express, June 8, 2020)" (Cited in Bania and Banerjee 6). Economic disparity is directly proportional to the digital divide. Unless each and every student has an access to 'Online' education', despite of best modules and best syllabi, it holds absolutely no significance for the growth and prosperity of the country. It will just give rise to more divide between rich and the poor. "A total of 320 million learners in India have been adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and have transitioned to e-learning" (Modi & Postaria: np), but e-learning is a distant dream for many.

Internet boom is considerably new in India, and before COVID-19, majority of people have used it merely as a recreational option than an educational necessity. "Among all active mobile internet users in India, which stands at approximately 451 million, entertainment is the purpose for a whopping 84%"(*Best Media Info* Feb 19, 2020). However, COVID situation turned the tables, and now the same phone became college, university and the teacher. Distance learning became the new reality. But the Higher Education 'teaching-learning' pedagogy has had been designed primarily keeping in view the physical learning environment than virtual, as it never felt like a necessity like this before. The distance edzeation centres in universities existed but only as peripheral modes of imparting education, running only in corners of the campuses. Also distance mode degrees never attracted the prospective employers or rather were met with second class treatment so much so that in newspapers, quite many, job advertisements audaciously declared that those who have acquired distance- mode degrees need not apply. Such uninformed and discriminatory cases of disparity further lead to less popularity of distance degrees in higher education. In such cases many bright and brilliant students especially young women who could not afford regular education due to various social and cultural reasons were discouraged. However as every dark cloud has a silver lining. COVID-19 has brought distance education to the forefront. This mode transformed into the only saviour in Covid situation. Yet the challenge remains for Higher Education to "make adjustments, (as) it is necessary to take into account the characteristics of national or subnational curricula, the country's resources and capacities to develop distance learning processes, the levels of segregation and educational inequality in the country "(Education 3).

Another important challenge though not directly but very strongly affecting Higher Education is the challenge to rehabilitate students, stop the increasing drop out rate and create conducive conditions for young students so that they can freely access education. Colleges and Universities face this challenge as many youngsters lost one or both parents to Covid. Consequently "many universities have seen fewer

enrolments this year. Due to the economic slowdown and job losses, parents are finding it difficult to fund their kids' education. Moreover, as most of the campuses remain off-limits for students, networking and socialising opportunities have reduced." (ApeeJay Blog). Hence in such a grave situation, many youngsters have to dropout in order to sustain themselves and their younger siblings. It is unfortunate if a young girl or a boy has to kill her or his dreams, and when the numbers are so staggering high, country on a war-footing needs to devise a strong policy for rehabilitation of such students and facilitate hassle free, rightful and the corruption free implementation.

Thus it may be noted that all the challenges are interconnected. Impoverished economy and unequal distribution of wealth has been aggravated manifold by Covid. The lockdown and lockdown like restrictions, though inevitable, have led to chronic unemployment in the country. "Estimates of unemployment at the Centre of Monitoring India's economy rose from 8.4% in mid-March to 23% in early April, with the urban unemployment rate risen to 30.9%. Education will gradually decline when unemployment rises."(Jain 156). Therefore big challenge for Higher Education is not only devising and disseminating education but also bringing students to the campuses.

Section B: Adaptations and Suggestions to combat the challenges:

Though the challenges to the Higher Education scenario seem endless and complex, yet it did take measures to facilitate education to as many students as possible. According to a global study among "the online distance learning modalities, the use of virtual, asynchronous learning platforms in 18 countries is noteworthy, while only 4 countries offer live classes (Bahamas, Costa Rica, Ecuador and Panama). With regard to offline distance learning methods, 23 countries broadcast educational programmes through traditional media such as radio or television" (Schleicher 3). In India too, "the lockdown period has seen a huge upsurge in digital learning. The access to the ... digital resources has grown nearly five times. In addition to these, many institutions are holding online classes through various modes."(India National Commission). 'Online' education is now seen as a new normal which seems now to stay along with 'Offline' mode.

Therefore to make its outreach and effectiveness better, Higher Education Sector has to first realise and accept the ground reality of India. The bodies like UGC and AICTE have to take into account our Education sector's infrastructure, rather than blindly imitate foreign policies and modules. We need to tailor-make a diverse and flexible system. As it is rightly asserted, "in the e-learning environment, in the absence of the learning level, understanding level, memory retention and recall level and other measurable factors relating to delivery and receipt of education, development of courses will be difficult as the course designer needs to be aware about the 'end customer' so that he or she can tailor the course content, exactly as per the students' needs"(Koul 3922). Thus 'train the trainer' must be on the primary check-list of 'online' teaching-learning environment.

Also entry into Higher Education is to made free and flexible for the needy and affected youth. Govt should work on ground level through the panchayat system involving

ASHA workers, Community workers and NGOs to launch a drive to identify orphaned and needy youth who have dropped out of College/ University or who could not even set their feet in the realms of higher education due to the death of one or both parents. Special ID cards can be issued to such students so that they do not have to face discriminatory behaviours at the gates of Higher education institutes. Each head of the institute must be directed not to refuse entry to any such student irrespective of marks or money. Any young girl or boy who enters the premises of educational institute, as a seeker of knowledge and better livelihood, must be encouraged and motivated. It must be the foremost duty of the authorities to make the journey easy for such youngsters.

Parallel to the drive to rehabilitate students, a comprehensive plan and policy should come in force where a blended mode of teaching-learning must be adopted. Three days a week policy could be adopted, three days classes can be held online and next three days offline, where teachers can deliver theoretical lectures in online mode, thus take up the modules designed for online teaching-learning and the next three days contact programme for one to one discussion could be implemented. We have to do away traditional classroom teaching-learning environment and blend our way into a better future.

Distance education should be promoted and should be treated at par with offline mode. Already initiatives like Diksha, e-Pathshala, National Repository Of Open Educational Resources (NROER), Swayam Prabha, National Digital Library are into force and "the qualitative results highlighted that the participants have gained knowledge ... 65% of them preferred Swayam and Coursera MOOC portals" (Khan 3). But it is important that educators must also be well versed with 'Online' tools needed for smooth dissemination of knowledge. As " the use of suitable and relevant pedagogy for online education may depend on the expertise and exposure to information and communications technology (ICT) for both educators and the learners" (Pokhrel 135).

Conclusion:

To summarize, it may be asserted that though the Higher Education faces huge challenges like 'Digital Divide' and 'Inadequate Infrastructure' but with right policies, timely intervention and a compassionate approach the gaping gore that COVID-19 has left in the lives of millions of youth stranded in the middle of crisis can be mended and tended. From rehabilitation to dissemination of education, from examinations to assessment every aspect needs to tailored keeping in view the Covid affected youngsters. Maximum and free outreach, blended and flexible mode of education, monetary help and funding, internet facilitation and community reading-rooms are few of the many measures that can provide some relief. The changing paradigms in higher education are to intensified in time. The mobilization of resources and identification of needy students must be carried out at a war-footing so that we can save as many promising and bright lives as we can from going off the track. In a country like India, human resource is the biggest dividend and we must channelise it wisely. Higher education sector plays major role in training the youth of the country and it is the need of the hour to vocationally train the youth, so that they 'earn while' they 'learn'. It is a

time of adaptations and changes for education system. Flexibility and free access is the mantra to bring all the diverse groups under one shielding and sheltering umbrella of education system. Education policies need to cater to the psychological, technological and financial needs of the students in a holistic way.

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