Education Amid COVID-19 Pandemic

Understanding the Response of Poor and Marginalised in Kashmir

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Abstract

Using a qualitative approach, the present study aimed to explore the response of the poor and marginalised, particularly the Mid-day Meal (MDM) beneficiaries to online education, thrusted untimely by the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic in Kashmir (India). Based primarily on the experiences of 28 participants belonging to various areas of Kashmir, the data was collected using face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The results of the study revealed that the sudden shift to online education amid COVID-19 has augmented the marginalisation of poor students, thereby exposing them to a more severe educational disadvantage. It is generally due to the inaccessibility, and unawareness of ICT-enabled gadgets among them. Hence, this digital marginality needs to be addressed, to bring underprivileged children into the fold of digital education.

Introduction

India has an overwhelming population of the poor and marginalised despite the country's constitutional pledge to structure an egalitarian society. The marginalised groups have, over the years, been deprived of socio-economic development and experience a sense

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of disadvantage, powerlessness, and exclusion. The structural exclusion associated with their identity of being the 'socially-other' pushes them to a vulnerable position, wherein they witness low mobility and limited access to vital resources such as nutrition, healthcare, and education. So, education has globally been recommended as a viable mechanism to empower the marginalised and redress their issues.

It reduces poverty, ensures economic growth, improves an individual's earning potential, and promotes a healthy population (Castello-climent, 2008; Hanushek and Wössmann, 2007). Against this backdrop the Government of India (GOI) through the National Policy on Education, 1986 has made schooling free and compulsory for all children up to fourteen years of age. However, a large percentage of children in India, especially from the rural and underprivileged sections, still do not attend school (Samal and Dehury, 2017) essentially due to the lack of consciousness regarding formal education, poverty, and malnutrition.

To bridge this gap between the marginalised and the school, the GOI launched a National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education (NP-NSPE) commonly known as the Mid-Day Meal (MDM) scheme (Garg and Mandal, 2013) in 1995. It played a significant role in solving the problem of hunger and malnutrition (Afridi, 2011; Bhargava et al., 2014; Drèze and Kingdon, 2001; Sofi, 2017; Swain and Das, 2017), thereby enhancing the enrolment ratio (Jayaraman and Simroth, 2015), retention, and attendance rates among children besides contributing towards gender equity (Drèze and Goyal, 2003).

Outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 outbreak primarily reported from Wuhan, China in December 2019, spread throughout the world including India, and was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2020). As a means to prevent the further spread of COVID-19, social isolation and physical distancing strategies were ensured (Shen et al., 2020) by imposing lockdowns. However, the resultant lockdown had a disastrous impact on human life and shattered the global economy with an irreparable jolt to education. The educational systems around the world responded to the pandemic with emergency 'e-learning' protocols, marking the rapid transition from face-to-face classes to online learning systems (Rashid and Yadav, 2020).

Aim of the study

The present study aimed to explore the response of the poor and marginalised, particularly the Mid-Day Meal (MDM) beneficiaries to online education, thrusted untimely by the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown in Kashmir.

Methodology

Focusing primarily on the students enrolled in various government schools of Kashmir whose enrolment is somehow determined by the MDM, the study is qualitative, and the data was collected mainly from primary sources.

A purposive sampling technique was adopted to recruit the participants. While engaging in purposive sampling, there is no probability of how many people will get involved and contribute. Therefore, the current research was not driven by the predetermined number of participants but rather by engaging those who had the desire to share their experiences. At the outset, 42 potential individuals were contacted of whom 14 disagreed to participate, and hence, the study shares the experiences of 28 participants, consisting of 12 students, 10 parents, and 6 teachers (Table 1).

It is pertinent to mention here that the students and parents were recruited from the poorest of the poor sections, which are provided food at highly subsidised rates under the Antyodaya Anna Yojana Scheme (AAY). Data was collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews from 1 April 2021 to 3 June 2021, a period, predominantly influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and online education in Kashmir. Interviews were conducted as per the convenience of participants in the local Kashmiri language and each interview ranged from 25 to 46 minutes in length.

Interview questions were purposely kept simple and free of technical terms, and were often altered following the course of the discussion. All the interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants, and later responses were first transcribed and then translated into English during analysis.

The data collected was subsequently analysed, consolidated, and presented based on specific and relevant themes. The names of the participants highlighted in this research are pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. It is pertinent to mention here that the data was collected while following all COVID-19 standard operating procedures (SOPs) in vogue.

Results and Discussion

From the data analysis, seven overarching themes highlighting the response of participants were identified which are discussed as follows:

Closure of Schools and the Growing Uncertainty

Soon after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in India, the government ordered the immediate closure of schools as a precautionary measure to ensure the safety of pupils. However, with the confirmation of the first COVID-19 positive case in Srinagar, Kashmir on 18 March 2020, uncertainty and panic gripped the valley of Kashmir, followed by a daily surge in new cases. It led to the extension of school closure, adversely affecting the education of poor and marginalised children, apart from a significant increase of mental trauma of their families. The participants described the

outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Kashmir as worrisome and challenging. A father having his daughters enrolled in a local government school stated,

> "Both, I and my spouse are illiterate and hence, unable to assist our children in their studies. We cannot even send them to any of our relatives for tuition, due to the fear of catching coronavirus or simply getting blamed for spreading it. Their education is at stake and I am worried about their future" (p18).

The students who are interested in their studies but do not have the means to access online education feel alienated and deprived. A student narrated,

> "Since school closure, no one had taught me. Teachers asked me to join the online classes, but we have no smartphones. I feel estranged and if lockdown gets extended, my education will be badly affected" (p8).

One of the psychological vulnerabilities and distress poor parents experienced was related to the perceived risk of significant others getting infected with COVID-19.

The anxiety so generated among parents profoundly affected the daily learning of their children. A non-literate parent stated,

> "Once my wife came to know that coronavirus is contagious, she became anxious and barred us from going outside. She even stopped our daughter from taking tuition classes, which I had somehow arranged for her a few months ago. I feel annoyed on seeing my daughter not being able to study the way she used to" (p19).

Restricted Movement of Children and the Impact Thereof

School closure and lockdown measures had forced children to stay indoors and spend much more time with adults who already feel stressed due to the uncertainty orchestrated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Students from less privileged backgrounds have witnessed negative consequences due to the COVID-19 outbreak (Aucejo et al., 2020). They create panic once their demands are not fulfilled, making it hectic for the poor parents to cope with the situation. A parent living in absolute poverty lamented,

> "Nowadays, I am unable to earn. I can't fulfill the demand of purchasing a bicycle for my son. It is disgusting to hear his emotional pleas and wailings. He now resorts to aggressive behaviour and creates panic in the family. He does not open his books as a mark of protest. All this heightens my anxiety" (p20).

Prolonged school closure and home confinement during a disease outbreak might have negative effects on children's physical and mental health (Brazendale et al., 2017; Brooks et al., 2020) increasing their chances of aggressiveness and rude behaviour. A mother participant got irritated while dealing with her children during the lockdown.

> "My son feels like caged at home. Oftentimes, he becomes aggressive and quarrels with his siblings. He hardly remembers to write pages or open his books. He irritates us all. I have sent him to his grandparents a few days ago to make my daughters feel safe and relaxed" (p.21).

Apart from engaging in routine domestic chores, some women in poor families perform farm work, stitching, or knitting mostly during the daytime to supplement the family income. However, children being stuck at home for the whole day, due to school closure create a hurdle in such activities. A mother narrated that her younger son tends to disrupt the normal functioning of the family.

> "Earlier, I had to take care of my younger kid only, and the other two used to be at school. Now schools are off and I have to look after all of them, which is quite challenging. I get no time to work in my garden" (p.17).

Another mother, finding her daughter stuck at home due to school closure, decided to teach her a skill.

> "While staying indoors, amid school closure, my daughter would often argue with her siblings and cause a disturbance. She had no access to online education and feels deprived. Now, she hardly opens her books. Hence, I am teaching her the skill of stitching to engage her and to make her productive" (p.21).

In age of consumerism, even marginalised children are become habitual of packaged foods including chips, biscuits, and chocolates. A participant who used to work as labour before the lockdown had no option left now, other than fulfilling the demands of his children on debit.

> "My children demand everything they see on television ranging from chocolates and chips to dishes. Right now, I have no income. I am forced to shop these items for them on debit" (p.14).

The excessive use of gadgets during the COVID-19 pandemic has been found to multiply the risk of addiction among users (Aliyev, 2020; Winther and Byrne, 2020). Due to prolonged confinement at home, children's increased use of the internet and social media predisposes them to use the internet impulsively, access inappropriate content, and also increases their vulnerability to getting bullied or abused (Cooper, 2020; UNICEF, 2020b).

In our study, we confirmed that the marginalised children who anyways have access to smartphones spend much of their time online, which increases their addiction to games and risk of exposure to objectionable content, affecting negatively their education. A parent owning a smartphone shared that his son got highly obsessed with it.

> "My son plays video games and watches YouTube videos only, I have been told. He is so addicted

to the phone that, he even forgets to eat food. He pays no attention to his studies which adds to my stress" (p.20).

The same is true with those marginalised children who have the availability of television at home. An illiterate father revealed that his children do not watch the academic lectures, which are being telecasted on various channels including the local 'DD Kashir' channel.

"Every time I enter my room, I find our children busy watching serials. I am unable to teach and guide them. They have now forgotten, where their school bags lie, which is much pathetic" (p.13).

A student is unable to use his phone for online classes and hence, he often plays games on it.

"The front camera and out speaker of my phone are not working, and hence it is not fit for online classes. Also, I have no money to buy internet packs. Hence, I play games to pass my time while being stuck at home" (p.3).

Survival of Families Amid Lockdown and the Suspension of MDM at Schools

Coronavirus, due to its high degree of contagiousness and exponential growth characteristics, has wreaked a global mayhem. Due to the absence of a specific vaccine against it, the non-pharmaceutical interventions of lockdown and physical distancing have been suggested as universally accredited strategies to reduce community transmission and assist in flattening the infection curve.

However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, the world has experienced a global economic turn-down which has directly worsened the pre-existing social inequality (Singh et al., 2020). India enforced a nationwide lockdown on 24 March and extended it up to 31 May 2020 in a phased manner, which put to a halt, the life people used to live. It brought with it an unprecedented economic disaster, adversely affecting the survival of the poor and marginalised sections.

The marginalised workers have no official contract; rather, they work mostly in unorganised sectors on daily wages. Hence, the stay-at-home orders crippled their movement and they lost their jobs, which further added to their vulnerability. The COVID-19 pandemic and the associated lockdown had created more severe conditions for the marginalised sections including food insecurity, health issues, emotional trauma, educational disadvantage, and massive unemployment. In our study, it became obvious that the marginalised parents have faced enormous hardships in arranging the daily meals for their families.

A participant who is by profession an auto driver could not find any work during the lockdown, which made his family suffer badly.

"The market stands off and I have not earned a single penny. Last week, my wife cried for having no rice at home to cook. As of now,

> I purchase all essentials on debit to feed my family. I am unable to pay the pending instalments for the loan I have already taken while purchasing the three-wheeler a few months ago. I am drenched in debt and possess no means to invest in the online education of my children" (p.20).

Another parent participant demonstrated that,

> "The production unit got closed and I lost my job. For a few days, we survived on our savings and the small quantity of food available at home. Then, the fear of starvation grew. I approached the plant owner for advance payment, but he refused to pay. Finally, a local NGO provided us with some food items and continued their assistance ahead. So, while striving for food, I can't shoulder the online education of my children" (p.14).

In circumstances where a woman is a sole caregiver or her husband is ill or unskilled, she is bound to play a various role to supplement the survival of her family. An old-aged participant, who is the father of five children lost his job of sweeping due to lockdown, which compelled his wife to earn.

> "I am unhealthy and unskilled. Since lockdown, my wife works in various households which are economically sound. They pay for her work and we all eat out of that money" (p.16).

A wife with her three children is deserted by her husband and she has no source of income except a small farm garden, which is insufficient to cater to the demands of her broken family. Her brothers often support her with basic amenities and did so in the COVID-19 pandemic as well. However, due to the lockdown, she hesitated to share her financial problems with them.

> "All of my three brothers work on daily wages. During the lockdown, they failed to earn. Hence, it seems unfair to ask them for monetary assistance anymore. I am concerned about the education of my children, which is on hiatus now. Tell me, what can I do? Shall I beg or suffer in silence?" (p.17).

MDM Amid Lockdown

A significant chunk of India's children, especially the poor and marginalised were enrolled by their guardians in government schools only to get free lunch. The MDM scheme solved their problem of hunger (Ramachandran, 2019: Samal and Dehury, 2017) and simultaneously served the purpose of enhancing their interest in studies.

However, due to COVID-19, schools were shut and the marginalised children missed out on their regular healthy meals served at schools, which declined their nutritional intake as well as their urge to study. To avoid these problems, the GOI decided to deliver packaged meals to children, dry ration, or deposit a food allowance in the bank

accounts of their parents. However, all these substitutes for MDM during the ongoing school closure are inadequate to yield its actual purposes.

After getting a certain amount of money as food allowance in her bank account, a girl student could not utilise it for herself.

> "Once my father came to know that an amount of 450 rupees has been credited to my account, he took me to the bank and withdrew the same amount. Out of which he handed over only 50 rupees to me" (p.2).

A Class VIII student stated that she is saving her food allowance to buy a smartphone in the future.

> "I collected all the money that was transferred to my father's bank account for April and May. I handed over the same to my mother to increase my savings as I wanted to purchase a smartphone ahead for online classes" (p.6).

Another student of Class VI narrated that he is giving the entire amount he receives for MDM to his father to buy the daily essentials.

> "It is a very tough time for us. My father's financial condition is disappointing. So, I handed over the received money to my father to help him in making our family feed during the ongoing crisis" (p.7).

Apart from it, many schools distributed dry rice to children. However, some students could not visit their respective schools and hence failed to collect it on time. A teacher described that they conveyed to the students to collect raw food from school, but only a few students were able to avail it.

> "We came to school on 5th May, to distribute food grains among our students. All of them were unable to come. This is perhaps due to the fear of getting contracted or movement restrictions placed in their areas" (p.23).

A father whose two daughters are enrolled in a local government school received both food grains and a certain amount of money but still, he felt disappointed with it.

> "I am not satisfied with the raw food, my children received. It is just a formality. It does not serve the purpose of attracting them to their studies. Eating at school is far better than receiving it at home. I don't think it could anyways substitute the MDM served at schools. So, I wish schools to reopen" (p.18).

Alternative Measures for Schooling

Given the COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions have been kept off throughout the country to halt its transmission. But to keep the teaching-learning process uninterrupted, an abrupt transition from classroom interaction to virtual education has been introduced by almost all affected parts of the world including Kashmir. The students belonging to economically

sound families have easily adapted to this unprecedented change and incorporated it into education.

However, the poor and marginalised children who are generally enrolled in government schools are unable to access online learning opportunities, mainly due to poverty, unawareness of e-learning, and the lack of necessary infrastructures such as computers, tablets, smartphones, or internet access. Almost all the teachers have prepared themselves well in advance to deliver online classes to further their responsibility of teaching students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A teacher soon after receiving directions regarding online education from his head teacher purchased a smartphone and learned how to deliver the online classes.

> "My son taught me how to use WhatsApp and Zoom for online classes. Now, I am giving online classes but to a few students only. The majority of our students do not have access to ICT-enabled gadgets and hence, they miss their online classes which is quite disappointing" (p.24).

The poor parents who are concerned about the education of their wards have somehow managed to provide online education to them, despite all the problems they have faced in the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. A parent on hearing that the teachers are going to deliver online classes managed to buy a smartphone for his three school-going children, because he thought that online education would help them to remain in touch with their studies.

> "I have five children, three of whom are students. Each requires a smartphone to access online education. I have purchased a smartphone. But only one of them is attending online classes regularly. The others often miss their classes, because their class timings coincide. I wish I had money to buy two more gadgets"(p.15).

A parent working as a labourer received a call from his son's class teacher, soon after lockdown and asked him about the Zoom application.

> "The teacher called me a few weeks ago and talked about the Zoom application and highlighted its significance. I have now downloaded that but no work has yet been assigned to my son by his school teachers" (p.13).

Apart from online classes, some educated youth and young teachers voluntarily came forward to take open-air community classes for the marginalised children, deprived of internet access or gadgets to substitute for their schooling. However, this innovative method of imparting education worked well for a few weeks only. Then, the huge increase in COVID-19 positive cases and the frequent absence of students in community schools marked a gradual end to this new alternative to schooling.

A teacher who played an active role in one of the community schools described that,

> "We taught in a community school and followed proper SOPs, but the students would often breach social distancing norms. We feared that if anyone gets infected, we will be held responsible. So, I decided to quit teaching in such an uncertain situation" (p.27).

Another teacher described her experience of teaching in a community school as pathetic.

> "It was hard to teach children amid the COVID-19 crisis, as they hardly understood the community transmission of coronavirus. Though, I wore a mask and gloves while teaching, I still feared getting infected. Gradually, I lost interest in teaching students at community school and left" (p.25).

A parent who works as a craftsman was initially happy to send his daughter to a local community school amid school closure. However, with the surge in daily cases across Kashmir, his wife insisted to focus on their daughter's safety first.

> "I know education is important, but my spouse was not interested to put our daughter into a death trap by insisting her for community classes. So, we gave priority to her health and wellbeing instead" (p.19).

A father was satisfied with sending his children to one of the community schools that was operating in his village. However, his dream of educating his children got shattered, once he came to know that the same community school no more exists.

> "I was relaxed to see my children attending the community classes free of cost. Since the day these classes were stopped, I feel desperate. I am myself illiterate and I have no idea how to compensate for their educational loss" (p.13).

Familial Incapacity to Afford ICT-enabled Gadgets and Declining Attendance Rate

In the wake of COVID-19, schools all over the world have switched over to e-learning protocols to replace the traditional practice of imparting education to students in classroom settings. However, in India, where access to education and the internet is still limited, bringing marginalised students into the fold of online education seems to be much more complicated. The participation of poor and marginalised children in online education has shown an abrupt decline since its inception. This is because of the incapacity of vulnerable families to buy ICT-enabled gadgets for their school-going children. So, the marginalised children failed to reap the benefits of online education, against the students who belong to rich or middle-class families and are generally enrolled in private schools. The vulnerable parents face economic scarcity as they lost their daily wages due to the ongoing lockdown. They are concerned much about the basic needs of their families and offering virtual

education to their children is what they described as beyond their reach. One of the parents shared,

> "I was working as a labourer in a nearby stone-cutting quarry, which is off now due to restrictions. To some degree, I was able to run my family. Now I have no work to do at all. My hope of educating my children got shattered. For online classes, they need smartphones at least, which I can't purchase. I even get stationery for them on debit. I no longer dream of their bright future, if schools continue to remain off" (p.14).

Another parent stated that due to his financial constraints, he is unable to buy a gadget for his children's education.

> "The current pandemic is havoc for us. Being poor, I am unable to manage family affairs properly. The education of my children is simply a burden on me. I can't buy smartphones and offer online education to them, so let them miss the classes" (p.16).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the MDM scheme acted as a ray of hope for marginalised students. It significantly enhanced the enrolment ratio and school participation among them. However, the participation of MDM recipients in online education during the COVID-19 pandemic has been badly hit by the poor economic conditions of their families. On one hand, marginalised parents are struggling to cope with the consequences of lockdowns, and on the other hand, their children need smartphones to attend virtual classes, which is challenging for them. The incapacity of poor parents to afford smartphones for their children led to a huge decline in attendance rates in online mode. A head teacher by profession revealed that the familial poverty of students serves as an impediment to online education.

> "Teachers of my school deliver online classes but only a few students can join. This is because the majority of our students belong to poor families and hence, face digital marginality. So, a huge decline in attendance rates is witnessed since we started imparting education through online mode" (p.28).

A girl student lamented that,

> "I am unaware of online education. My family is also unconcerned. I have not given any online class yet, nor can I give ahead. I have neither smartphone nor do I know how classes can be attended on it. So, I want to attend offline lessons only and enjoy lunch with my peers at school" (p.11).

A student in Class VIII got a smartphone but still could not use it to get benefitted.

> "Since lockdown, I have not studied anything. One of my teachers told me to get a smartphone and attend online classes. My parents are poor but still, they managed one for me. Little did I know that I will

be the only student in my class with a smartphone. The rest do not possess. Hence, the teachers denied delivering online classes for me alone" (p.4).

A teacher participant found that the response rate of students to online education is very low.

"I have 33 students in my class, but only 6 are attending the online classes. I have repeatedly discussed online education with parents but they say that due to the lockdown, they are unable to earn and have no savings to bear the brunt of online education. If the low attendance rate in online classes continues, I fear an increase in dropout rate among the students enrolled in public schools" (p.26).

Increased Instances of Child Abuse and Child Labour

With the restriction of movement due to the lockdown, poor and underprivileged children have an increased risk of being exploited and becoming victims of violence and abuse (Cooper, 2020; United Nations, 2020). The disruption caused in families due to social isolation, economic adversity, and loss of livelihood increase the risks of domestic violence and child abuse including beating children or using harsh and abusive language. A student of Class V recalled that he was beaten several times by his parents during the lockdown.

"Whenever my parents were stressed or had no money available and I insisted to buy eatables for me, they would often beat me in such conditions. Sometimes, while refusing to write pages, I was beaten by my mother with a broom" (p.1).

Another girl child of Class VI complained that she often wept due to her mother's harsh behaviour amid school closure.

"My mother only concentrated on my younger brother and many a times ignores me and my sister. She used to curse us, whenever we delayed the household work" (p.5).

School closure coupled with economic adversity may force children and adolescents into child labour (Singh et al., 2020). A student described that he started working as a labourer to provide financial support to his family.

"I am stuck at home. I have no access to online education. So, I got a chance to work as a mason. I give some of the money I earn to my parents and utilise the rest on myself. I have left schooling. I am now interested in earning money than consuming my time in studies via smartphones" (p.12).

A father working as a carpenter found his son idle at home during the COVID-19 pandemic and made him work as a labourer to earn money.

"My son was wasting his time. I am taking him with me now. He works as a labourer and earns a good amount of money. In the

evening, however, I give him 100 or 200 rupees for his day's work. His work benefits me" (p.22).

Another student confessed that he became a child labourer due to the lockdown.

"We are so poor that we live in an ordinary hut. Our economic conditions worsened due to the lockdown and the sudden illness of my father. Also, I failed to buy a smartphone for online classes. Now, I am working in a medical shop to earn the bread and butter for my family" (p.9).

Conclusion

Results of our study revealed that the ongoing configuration of education among the marginalised sections of Kashmir is grim and pathetic. It is primarily due to their incapacity to afford the ICT-enabled gadgets to bring their wards into the fold of online education, which has emerged as a substitute for classroom learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to lockdown, the marginalised have been confined in an unchanging cycle of poverty, wherein the education of their children stands compromised. Moreover, the MDM served in schools before the COVID-19 outbreak, came to a standstill which led to nutritional crises among the beneficiaries, and simultaneously mounted the brunt of arranging lunch for them on their parents. To sum up, it can be safely argued that the transition in education from classroom learning to virtual classes amid the COVID-19 pandemic has further intensified the marginalisation of poor children thereby exposing them to a more severe educational disadvantage.

Suggestions

Online learning is a viable alternative to education during the COVID-19 pandemic, but the marginalised students being deprived of ICT facilities are unable to benefit from it. The government needs to endow public schools with proper ICT-enabled facilities and provide the requisite ICT-based knowledge to students. Also, there is a need to frame policies of distributing ICT-enabled gadgets for free or at subsidised costs among marginalised students to equip them for online education.

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