Children, Education and The Covid-19 Pandemic

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Volume II

Perspectives - A Peer-Reviewed, Bilingual, Interdisciplinary E-Journal
Janki Devi Memorial College
University of Delhi

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About the author:

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Some of her recent publications include: 'Equity and Quality are Two Sides of the Same Coin in India's School Education'; 'Cartographies of empowerment – tracing the journey of Mahila Samakhya'; and 'Inclusion and exclusion of students in schools and classrooms in primary and upper primary schools of India – a synthesis of a six state study'.

Abstract:

With the closure of schools across the country, for over 18 months now, children have been impacted in many ways. Apart from the loss of learning and being with friends and peers, the children of migrants, of the rural and urban poor and those who have lost parents/family members - the trauma faced by them has not received the attention it merits. Equally, the closure of low cost and mid-level private schools have left many children without a school to go to or connect with. The government schooling system is not yet geared to enrol more children. In this essay, I plan to explore the ways in which school-age children have been affected by the pandemic, the inadequacy of online schooling and the measures taken by governments and civil society organisations to address the issues faced by children and their families. The regional/state-specific differences shall be explored, using available case studies and documentation available in the public domain.

Children, Teachers, Schools and the Covid-19 Pandemic

The Context:

As the Covid-19 pandemic hit us, the sudden closure of schools across the country, the unprecedented lockdown and the migration of people from urban to rural areas shook the country. At the start of the lockdown, government and civil society organisations turned their attention to health and safety related issues. Many NGOs and philanthropic organisations supported the migrating workforce, providing shelter and food. Some of them set up Covid quarantine camps, others were busy procuring oxygen and essential medicines. We all witnessed a huge churning around us, fear was palpable and as we approached the second wave in 2020, the mortality figures frightened people across the country. It was indeed unprecedented and a time that challenged everyone.

For almost twelve months, education was not on the radar of the government or NGOs. Somehow, we all felt the lockdown was temporary and things would bounce back to 'normal'. Online classes were initiated as a stop-gap measure, something that would be temporary. While online classes were initiated, teachers were not sure how to proceed and children were wary. While upper middle class urban children adapted gradually, the others had few digital resources. Teachers and school administrators realised that the vast majority of students from poor and not-so-poor families did not have access to electronic devices that they could use. In the initial stages, no survey was done by the respective state/district administrations to ascertain the availability of laptops, tablets and smart phones. This was done only in late 2020 and early 2021, twelve to fifteen months after online education was adopted. Another challenge came to the fore. Private schools that cater to the poor and to those slightly above the poverty line started shutting down. They could not sustain their operations without regular student fees. The third shock to hit the education system was migration. As families moved back to their villages, there was a sudden surge in the number of children who were not enrolled in any school. Many of them tried to enrol their children in government schools, but as the schools were shut, they were left hanging, not knowing where to go. Such children did not have any access to online learning as they were not formally enrolled in any school.

In the later part of the year 2020 and the early months of 2021, several field-based surveys were published which gave us a clearer picture of the situation of children, the state of online education and the challenges faced by teachers and school heads (APU 2021 A and APU 2021 B, ASER 2020, ASER 2021, Bakhla, Khera, Dreze and Paikra 2021, CSF 2021, MOE, GOI 2021 and Oxfam 2020). Equally, a select number of regional newspapers started publishing ground reports on students struggling without internet connectivity, increasing incidence of child marriage (especially among adolescent girls), young boys and girls dropping out to supplement income of impoverished families, and the visible increase in the number of children working in stone quarries, eateries and other small industries as child labourers/workers. In addition, there were reports of many young girls doing domestic labour. There were also some media reports on child trafficking and forced child marriages. It is hard to verify these reports, because field-based reporting by journalists or field based qualitative research studies were not being done during the pandemic related lockdown.

This brief article focuses on the impact of the pandemic on children and teachers. This article is based on the above cited surveys and press reports. This is not an original field-based study, but one that relies on secondary material. This paper will start with the impact of Covid-19 and the lockdown on children (young and adolescent), the schoolteachers and then finally the schools – government and private.

Impact Of Covid-19 On School-Age Children:

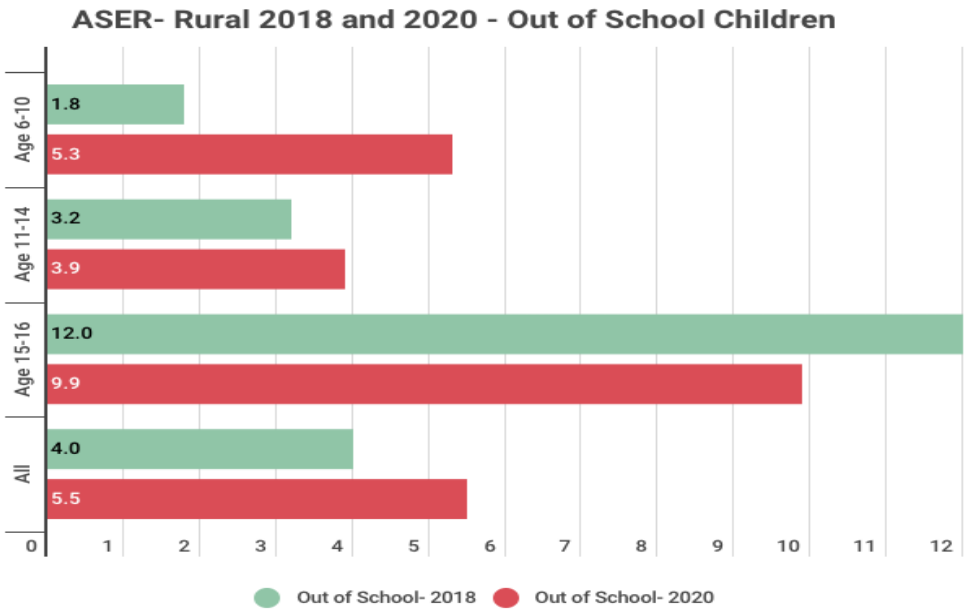
When school shut down suddenly on March 25, 2020, the government, parents and indeed all children believed this would be a short-term measure to cut rapid transmission of the virus. No one anticipated that the closure would not be lifted for almost two academic years. This was not the case in India alone; across the world everyone believed that life would come back to normal. However, that was not to be. As the months rolled by and the summer vacation came to a close, the government woke up to the idea of introducing online classes for all children in schools – government and private. Teachers and school administrations had to suddenly plan for online classes. Needless to say, neither the government nor the schools had any experience with online education. Yet, they stumbled along, trying out and learning as

they went ahead. The teachers, many of whom had very little knowledge of computers and internet, many did not possess any devices apart from smart phones and many did not possess any connectivity, were suddenly asked to start taking online classes. Children were also dazed; they needed time to acknowledge that schools would not reopen for a long time and that their teachers would teach them through a phone, a tablet or a computer. Parents were in a state of shock; those who had the luxury of working from home were left multi-tasking. However, the vast majority of workers in essential and emergency services had to report to work, those in the service sector lost their jobs, the informal sector workers found themselves without work or any livelihood, and the migrant workers were stranded without work, food or shelter. This led to an unprecedented crisis with thousands of families trying to walk home in the absence of trains and buses. The country witnessed a tragedy of enormous proportion. Hunger, joblessness, lack of shelter, and the prospect of slipping into abject poverty stalked millions of Indians. The crisis that this paper discusses is just one dimension of the multifaceted tragedy that India faced.

Children were affected in many ways. If we look at the poorest families across the country – the first shock that hit children was food insecurity. As evident from the Global Hunger Index of 2021, India has slipped to the 101st position among 116 countries (https://www.globalhungerindex.org/india.html). During the Covid-19 lockdown and subsequent loss of livelihood, the impact of this economic shock on children is something that the government has not been able to acknowledge even though National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data has consistently pointed towards a worsening situation, especially among the poorest quintile of the population. As schools closed, children were deprived of the mid-day meal. While the ICDS programme in several states made provisions to distribute dry rations to children through Aanganwadi workers, such a planned programme was not initiated by the education department in all the states. Even as I write this, there is little and patchy data on which states have arranged for dry rations and or providing hot cooked meals. In view of the debate on growing hunger and child malnutrition – it may be many months (if not years) before we come to grips with the impact of the discontinuation of the mid-day-meal on child health.

The second, and much publicised and discussed impact has to do with access to school and online education. A recent study done by Azim Premji University (APU 2021a) covered 16,067 children in 1,137 public schools (government schools) in 44 districts across 5 states (Chhattisgarh, Karnataka, MP, Rajasthan and Uttarakhand) focused on assessment of four specific abilities in language and mathematics across classes 2 - 6. 92 percent of children on an average have lost at least one specific language ability from the previous year across all classes - 92 percent in class 2, 89 percent in class 3, 90 percent in class 4, 95 percent in class 5 and 93 percent in class 6. 82 percent of children on an average have lost at least one specific mathematical ability from the previous years across all classes, i.e. identifying single and two-digit numbers, performing arithmetic operations, using basic arithmetic operations for solving problems, describing 2D/3D shapes, reading and drawing inferences from data. 67 percent in class 2, 76 percent in class 3, 85 percent in class 4, 89 percent in class 5 and 89 percent in class 6. The reported 'learning loss" was astounding. While educators have been aware that long breaks like summer vacation did influence learning, for should we say forgetting; no one in the education system was prepared for such startling findings.

The ASER Wave-1 report that came out in early 2021 also revealed an alarming picture. They recorded a small shift in enrolment from private to government schools when the survey was done in September 2020. Comparing their own 2018 data with what they found in 2020, the survey revealed that the proportion of boys enrolled in government schools rose from 62.8 percent in 2018 to 66.4 percent in 2020, and the proportion of girls enrolled in government schools increased from 70 percent in 2018 to 73 percent in 2020. What was more revealing was that a larger number of children were currently not enrolled in any school and significant number of the not-enrolled were children of age 6 and 7 – as evident in the graph on out of school children based on ASER 2020 data. This survey threw up some positive stories too – the big one being, "*regardless of parents' education level, families invest significant effort in supporting children*…" (page 2, ASER 2020)



Source: ASER 2020

The ASER survey also revealed that governments across the country tried to get the textbooks to children, even when the schools were closed. The outliers where less than a quarter of all children received any material included Rajasthan (21.5 percent), Uttar Pradesh (21 percent) and Bihar (7.7 percent). The Southern states had done remarkably well and tribal states like Chhattisgarh made concerted efforts to organise classes under trees and in public spaces for small groups of children. Interestingly, over 87 percent of private school students received textbooks during the lockdown. In several states teachers tried to reach out to children and share worksheets and other materials for home study. The picture that emerges is mixed, with at least one-third of children having had some contact with their teachers during the lockdown. (ASER 2020).

The report LOCKED OUT (Bakhla, Khera, Dreze et al. 2021) paints a grimmer picture. This survey covered 1362 households, 1362 children enrolled in classes 1 to 8 from socially and economically underprivileged families across 15 states of India. The sample was skewed in favour of the poor and the survey did not cover the middle classes or the rich. As expected, the survey revealed that only 28 percent of the children were studying regularly at the time of the survey and 37 percent of children were not studying at all. What was more worrying was that nearly half of the sample children were unable to

read more than a few words and parents shared their apprehension about the reading and writing abilities of their children. Only 23 percent of urban and 8 percent of rural parents said that their children had "adequate" online access.

The reasons are fairly obvious. Given that the sample was drawn from underprivileged villages and hamlets - barely one-fourth of children in urban and eight per cent in rural areas sampled were found to be studying online. A shocking statistic by any measure. This survey reinforces what we have known for some time now – online education is a luxury that very few can actually access. While 77 percent of urban and 51 percent of rural families had access to a smartphone, only 24 percent urban and 8 percent rural were studying regularly. The reasons for this difference were found to be 9a) child does not have his/her own smartphone, (b) poor connectivity, (c) no money for 'data'. (d) online study beyond the understanding of the child and parents unable to help, and (e) no online material (through WhatsApp) was sent by the school. In many states (like Assam, Bihar, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh) the government had not made any effort to get the materials to the 'offline children. Therefore, the off-line children were left to fend for themselves. They were just hanging around and playing, helping out at home or in the case of older children, they were encouraged to work. (Bakhla, Khera, Dreze et al. 2021)

Table 1: How many children access online education?

Proportion (percent) of sample children who:	**Urban**	**Rural**
Are studying online regularly	24	8
Are not studying at all nowadays	19	37
Did not meet their teacher(s) in the last 30 days	51	58
Did not have test/exam in the last three months	52	71
Are unable to read more than a few words	42	48

Source: Bakhla, Khera, Dreze et al, September 2021[i].

This data is consistent with what we know about families with access to internet facilities. The Lancet COVID-19 Commission – The India Task Force report of April 2021 pointed out that there is "Widening Learning Inequalities (only 24 percent of Indian households have access to internet facilities, this is barely 15 percent in rural India as compared to 42 percent in urban India; of the poorest households only 2.7 percent have access to a computer and 8.9 percent to internet facilities and only 8 percent of 5 to 24 years persons have access to both internet and digital devices. Learning loss is particularly severe in the early years of a child.) (The Lancet. 2021[ii]) (end of quote?)

The third disturbing impact has been on private schools that cater to the poor – especially those that charge a meagre fee and provide education to children in rural areas, urban slums and also to a vast majority of middle-class families that are above the poverty line, but live a precarious existence. Government data tells us that nearly 50+ percent of children study in private schools with close to 35 percent studying in unaided private schools. This has been an increasing trend evident from the the 1980s. A recent survey done by Central Square Foundation reveal that among those who are studying in unaided private schools, close to 45 percent of then pay a fee of Rs 500 per month or less; and 70 percent pay less that Rs. 1000 per month (CSF. 2021) Most of these low-cost private schools depend on teachers who are not trained and many of them are hired on renewable contracts. The survey found that only 50 to 60 percent of teachers in such school had the capability to manage online classes. Parents of students in these schools were living on the edge – many of them lost their livelihood and could not pay the fee regularly. The private schools did not receive the RTE reimbursement that was due to them from the government[iii]. As a result, three things happened – children dropped out when parents could not pay the fee; teachers were not paid or they were laid off; and the schools themselves faced a financial crisis and shut down.

This narrative is reinforced/confirmed in a recent Ministry of Education, Government of India Report (MOE, GOI 2021), which points out that they expect a huge surge in enrolment of children in

government schools across rural and urban areas and are, therefore, gearing up the government school system to meet the demand. As of July 2021 – the GOI estimates that 3,50,021 elementary and 1,04,650 secondary level students were reported to be "out of school" in rural blocks. The survey is still not complete, and the numbers may increase. In view of the need to accommodate the children in government schools, GOI issued guidelines to provide admission to migrant families (without identity proof or transfer certificates) and a survey of out of school children reveals that the problem is quite severe. When schools did reopen in February 2022 many of the fears were found to be true and there have been reports from many states that enrolment of students in government schools have increased. The Economic Survey presented just before the budget session of Parliament (Lok Sabha) in February 2022 pointed out that even though data from the Ministry of Education is only available up to 2019 - 20, the impact of the pandemic on enrolment and dropout rates during the pandemic years, 2020 and 2021, could not be assessed through comprehensive official data; state governments were reporting a surge in enrolment in government elementary schools (Ministry of Finance, GOI, Economic Survey 2022). A clearer picture would be available in September-October 2022 when the annual UDISE data is updated. Till such time, it would not be possible to make any conclusive statement on the extent of movement from private to government schools.

The impact of school closures on child health and nutrition, learning loss and mental and emotional wellbeing would require more research. The tragedy is that the mainstream university departments of education and child development are not engaged in this kind of research and as evident from the references used for this article, the bulk of the research is either being done by individuals/groups of individuals, NGOs and private philanthropic foundations. The public university system has failed us and as the debate on the impact of Covid-19 continues, the deafening silence from public universities and research institutions is disturbing.

Impact of Covid-19 on Schoolteachers:

Teachers too went through a traumatic phase. Anecdotal reports trickling in reveal that many teachers in private (low cost) schools lost their jobs, contract teachers in government schools had not been paid their salaries since the lockdown, and most worrying of all is that there is a great deal of uncertainty about when the schools will open and whether the non-permanent teachers would get their jobs back. Press reports that teachers from private schools enrolled for daily wage work in rural areas (NDTV, 20 May 2020)[iv]. Equally worrying is the pressure on teachers teaching secondary classes to finish the syllabus and prepare the children for examinations. Given the financial crisis being faced by farmers, traders and small businesspersons, teachers say that children have not been coming for tuitions. As a result, private/jobless teachers had no source of income. NGOs working in rural areas say that most tuition centres/classes are dysfunctional, not only because of the need for physical distancing during the pandemic, but also because of financial distress. This issue was highlighted recently in the media when parents/teachers and school heads vociferously objected to Haryana government's announcement to hold board examinations for classes 5 and 8 to ascertain learning levels of children. The teachers argued that the children are not ready due to the learning loss during the pandemic related lockdown.

There is another dimension that is not being talked about much in the media. Schoolteachers have been the backbone of the state government's 'COVID-19 relief efforts, quarantine camps that were run during the first and second wave, vaccination camps, contact-tracing, household surveys and election related work for state-elections as well as Panchayat elections. As schools shut down, state governments lost no time to mobilise the teacher cadre – both regular and contract teachers – to join the government workforce to manage the pandemic. While this may be necessary at one level, the impact of this has been threefold: (a) online classes for children in government schools did not receive the attention that it merited, at least not till recently; (b) with the exception of may be Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh, teachers could not go to the homes of children and reach workbooks and worksheets, especially to those who had no means to participate in online learning; and (c) teachers were expected to work in Covid-19 related camps and campaigns, but were not given the status of front-line workers. As a result, they were not vaccinated on a priority basis.

What impact has this had on schoolteachers? Through the second wave of Covid-19, in 2020 newspapers and email-newsletters of schoolteacher unions highlighted the situation of teachers who were engaged in state elections, managing Covid quarantine centres, conducting local Panchayat elections, and effectively working as frontline workers of the administration. Uttar Pradesh alone lost 1621 teachers as of May 17, 2021. Most recently the Telengana Teachers Federation said that 230 teachers lost their lives during the second Covid-19 wave (Times of India, 15 May 2021). In Maharashtra 220 teachers lost their lives (16th May Times of India), in Madhya Pradesh there are reports of 51 deaths (National Herald, 13 April 2021). There are some patchy reports of teaching falling ill and being hospitalised in West Bengal, we still do not have adequate information so far from other states like Assam. There is no comprehensive database that keeps track of teachers who lost their lives during the second wave of Covid-19.

What does this tell us about the real status of our schoolteachers working in government schools across India? The primary identity of our school teachers is that of a government servant or a government employee – who is expected to respond to call of duty' (Ramachandran et al. 2018, Ramachandran 2020). The irony is that while their status as government workers is not problematic for teachers, the problem has to do with shifting status (Ramachandran, 2005 and 2009). As government workers (especially contract teachers), they are expected to do what they are called upon to do, but they do not get the same status as other field level frontline workers (Ramachandran et al 2018). The Teachers Union leaders from Uttar Pradesh complained that teachers were not vaccinated on a priority basis just before the Panchayat elections of 2021. The second worrying dimension that emerged during the author's discussions with teacher union leaders of Uttar Pradesh was that the teachers felt that their primary role as schoolteachers is often set aside, as a result many of them have been talking about their inability to conduct online classes or provide on-site learning materials to children in the villages. Equally, when they are called for training workshops (for example for state and Panchayat elections) – basic Covid protocols like social distancing, compulsory masking and avoiding closed spaces is often bypassed. Teachers argue that they are expected to communicate the Covid protocols – but when they are involved in workshops or other activities – the government does not follow the same protocols with

them. Women teachers in several states complained that basic toilet, hand washing, and related facilities were not provided as many of these training camps were held in ad-hoc structures (shamiyana/tent). This was also the response from teacher union leaders of Rajasthan. (Zoom meeting with teacher union leaders of UP done by the author in June 2021). Media reports revealed that 1621 teachers lost their lives in Uttar Pradesh alone in the immediate aftermath of the panchayat elections of May 2021. (Omar Rashid, The Hindu, 17 May 2021, Manoj Singh, The Wire, 18 May 2021). Several Hindi newspapers in Uttar Pradesh filed similar reports.

Teaching online requires some familiarity with computers. The content that teachers have to navigate needs to be adapted for online teaching because the online mode requires short capsules followed by worksheets that children can work on. Most teachers are used to talk-chalk mode, either using the textbooks or explaining concepts on the blackboard. While the government trained teachers for election and covid duties, there were hardly any training workshops to enable teachers to teach online. Many teachers tried to download content from the internet and use them, some others prepared PowerPoint presentations and some others designed worksheets to email or send by WhatsApp. The apex teacher education institutions like the SCERT or DIET did not rise to the occasion and support schoolteachers. There may have been a few teacher educators who may have done what they could. The important point to note is that there was no comprehensive strategy to support teachers.

The Ministry of Education, Government of India did put out e-resources through NCERT. The PM e-vidya portal, DIKSHA (one nation, one digital education platform), Swyam Prabha (TV channel), etc. were rolled out during the pandemic. According to the government (MOE, GOI 2021), 35 states and UTs rolled out their own DIKSHA material, which had teaching-learning content for classes 1 to 12. Teaching learning material is apparently available in 31 languages. The DIKSHA portal also has teacher capacity building modules. (MOE, GOI 2021, pp 6-8). The Kendriya Vidyalaya, Navodaya Vidyalaya and other premium central government funded school made good use of the DIKSHA material. Equally, CBSE school also used the material. The moot point is not what the government had put out online, but the ability of ordinary schoolteachers across the country to access these resources and use them. While

there has been no survey on the experience of schoolteachers with online education and the usefulness of the DIKSHA and other e-resources, anecdotal evidence from teacher unions reveal that the picture is mixed. In the absence of any concrete evidence, it would be difficult to make any conclusive statement on how the e-resources were used by teachers.

Conclusion:

There is a lot that we know thanks to the surveys done in 2020 and 2021. There is also a lot that we do not know as yet, especially with respect to the overall synergy between the efforts of the state governments, Government of India, the school education administration and the large body of private schools. The overall picture that emerges continues to be grim and disturbing. As state-after-state prepare to reopen school and return to face-to-face learning or some kind of a hybrid model, it remains to be seen how well prepared we will be to address emotional distress and trauma, learning loss, high dropout rates especially among adolescent girls and boys, and the capacity of teachers to respond to the challenges that face them.

Some states may be better prepared than others and some category of schools may gear up well, especially the premier government schools, high end private schools and the mid-level private and government aided schools. The crisis that stares us in the face has to do with schools, government and private, that cater to the very poor and the marginalised. As it has happened in the past, this vulnerable section of our country may once again be left out or ignored. Will be go back to the 1970s and 1980s when the poorest of the poor were effectively out of the schooling system or participated from the margins? The jury is still out, and time alone will tell.

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Notes:

[i]NiraliBakhla, Khera, Reetika, Jean Dreze, Vipul Paikra. 2021. Locked out: Emergency Report on School Education, 6 September 2021.

[ii]https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ef3652ab722df11fcb2ba5d/t/60a3cff2b425ae21a5b49405/1621348340073/India+TF+Reopening+Schools+April+2021.pdf
Accessed on 22 October 2021

[iii] Under the RTE Act of 2009, the government is supposed to reimburse the fees of children enrolled under the EWS (economically weaker section) category, as the RTE Act made it mandatory for private schools to reserve a certain percentage of seats in primary schools for EWS students.

[iv]Chiranjeevi and his wife Padma set off early morning on their bike to their work site. Both were till recently teachers. Chiranjeevi holds a postgraduate degree and also a B Ed degree that made him a social studies teacher 12 years ago. Padma holds an MBA degree and was working as a primary school teacher. The couple has now turned manual labourers. For the last few days, they have been going to the MGNREGA work site near their village in Bhongir-Yadadri because for the last two months they have got no salary and there is no telling when it may come again amid the coronavirus pandemic. (https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/coronavirus-teachers-techie-who-made-rs-1-lakh-turn-mgnrega-labourers-amid-pandemic-2232388)