Impact of Covid-19 on the Educational Scene at Sagardwip

Dipankar De[*]

Abstract:

COVID-19 is not just a public health issue. As it took the form of pandemic across the globe, lockdowns were announced by the respective governments to fight the disease for ensuring social distancing in the absence of any other preventive/curative therapy till now. As a result, it had its disastrous ramifications on the economies of the affected countries.The media, the academic circles, the policy makers, the economic agents of all hues and above all, the people in general participated to deliberate on the aspects of public health and the consequent economic crises. However, one issue which did not receive the desired traction, wasimmense loss of teaching days having its deleterious effect on the students. This article is a modest effort in that direction. The paper starts with the illustration of an improvised method undertaken by a chemistry teacher of Pune. The second illustration refers to a survey conducted by two faculty members of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Delhi as regards the online teachingexperience of the university. The thirdillustration is drawn from the experience ofthe Institute for the Handicapped and Backward People(IHBP), Kolkata, an organization running a special school for the physically and mentally challenged children.

Lastly, the paper gives a sketch of the efforts made byParibesh Unnayan Parishad (PUPA),a NGO based at Sagardwip and running an informal school under its umbrella to provide supplementary coaching to the poor children of a couple of adjoining villages of the island.The case studies throw light on the relative merits and demerits of classroom education and online teaching and even the heterogeneity of the latter. In the end, the paper tries to venture a suggestion as to what could be a contingency model for education of school children of Sagardwip where the schools often face 'lockdown-like' situations due to recurrent cyclones and heavy rain falls.

Key Words : COVID, Online teaching , PUPA, Physically & Mentally Challenged, EQ & IQ, Virtual class , Amphan, ARYA, Bio diversity, Drop-outs.

Abbreviations Used: COVID =Corona Virus Disease; GDP = Gross Domestic Product; NGO= Non Government Organization; PUPA = Paribesh Unnayan Parishad ; IHBP = Institute for the Handicapped & Backward People; EQ = Emotional Quotient; IQ = Intelligence Quotient; ARYA = Attracting & Retaining Youth in Agriculture; ICAR = Indian Council of Agricultural Research.

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* *Freelance Economist & Researcher; email-* dipankarde87@gmail.com

1. Prologue :

COVID-19, originated in the Chinese city of Wuhan inits Hubei province in the month of November 2019.It moved from East to West (China to USA and Europe) as people travelled either on business or pleasure trips. India recorded its first case on 30th January,2020. In order to curb the rapid spread of this viral disease having no definite/specific cure, the Government of India declared a nation-wide strict lockdown on 25[th]March, 2020, urging people to keep confined to home and maintain social(physical)distancing, thought to be the only remedial measure available.

As a result, India's GDP was bound to come down, turning a huge number of the working people jobless and without income.Besides economic stagnation, another most unfortunate consequence was loss of reading-days for students as all educational institutions were closed. This paper highlights a few case studies to understand how different institutions and individuals have tried to cope with the problem. In the context, the paper wants to understand the impact particularly on Sagardwip (South 24 Parganas district, West Bengal) and how Paribesh Unnayan Parishad (PUPA), a grass-root NGOtried to address the problem there which is its centre of activity.

2. Case Studies :

2.1 Pune Illustration :

A chemistry teacher from Puneimprovised to teach her students remotely from her home.She posted a video on her LinkedIn page which showed her writing on a chalkboard and explainingthe lesson.Her phone is fastenedto a clothes hanger and suspended between a plastic chair and the ceiling. She thus created a makeshift tripod as she did not have one ready-made tripod at home. This facilitated her students to look at the chalkboard as she taught and thus simulated the classroom experience.
Similarly, many teachers have circulated their teaching notes to their students through WhatsApp/ email and other social media platforms.

2.2 JNU Experience :

Consequent on a survey of theInternet-basedonline teaching introduced by the university during the lockdown,a report was prepared by two former Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) teachers' association presidents. In terms of the survey report, 310 faculty members (out of the total strength of 576 teachers) participated in online teaching. A survey form was circulated in the university and 131 teachers responded with their feedback. The report states that more than 70% of the teachers were of the opinion that online education cannot successfully

replicate the offline in-person classroom. The online mode fails to meet thestudents' needs and cannot ensuresmoothexercise for the teacher.

The university also informed Ministry of Human Resource Development that only 35.6% of male students and 29.7% of female students had participated in online education. The reasons forlow participation lie inlack of internet access, stable bandwidth and requisite devices for a large number of students, more particularly as they had to go back to their homes due to lockdownand do not have necessary infrastructure available there for online education. The inference drawn in the report is that the online teaching cannot replace classroom teaching involving face-to-face interaction between the teacher and the students.

2.3 IHBP Model :

The Institute for Handicapped & Backward People (IHBP) is an organization based at Behala, Kolkata. IHBP runs a special school under the name "Behala Vivekananda Institution". The school isaffiliated tothe West Bengal Board/ Council (secondary/ higher secondary education) and caters to differently-abled (physically and mentally challenged) children studyingin pre-primary to higher secondary standards.It was a real challenge for the school to conduct teaching sessions outside classrooms. The following paragraphs including two photos (live classroom and mobile phone-teaching) outline the efforts of the school. All 35 Special Teachers (including Dance, Drawing, Music, Art & Craft) as well as therapists like Physiotherapists and Speech Therapists were involved in the online exercise which catered to almost 500 students spread over different centers of IHBP.

Figure No.-1: IHBP School Classroom

There are several Cerebral Palsy (CP) students who need Physiotherapy.Likewise Hearing Impaired(HI)studentsare in need of Speech Therapy. Besides,the school has enrolled autistic and intellectually disabled (ID) children also. TheSpecial Teachers, Physiotherapists and Speech Therapists interacted with the Parents over mobile phone(smart and vanilla) andshowed them different types and methods of Physiotherapy, Speech Therapy, Occupational Therapyandprovided other advice, based on the requirement of each student. The Parents were asked to ensurethe therapies to their children accordingly.

Parents of students of lower classes also participated in the programme. For the parents who did not havesmartphones, the Special Teachers discussed in great detail with the mover normal phones about what is to be studied and were asked to sit with their children and make them study. Schedules were made keeping in mind the individual capability of each student. Daily classes were held, where subjects were taught and discussed by providing study materials and giving tasks. Students were asked to complete the task and submit in the next class.
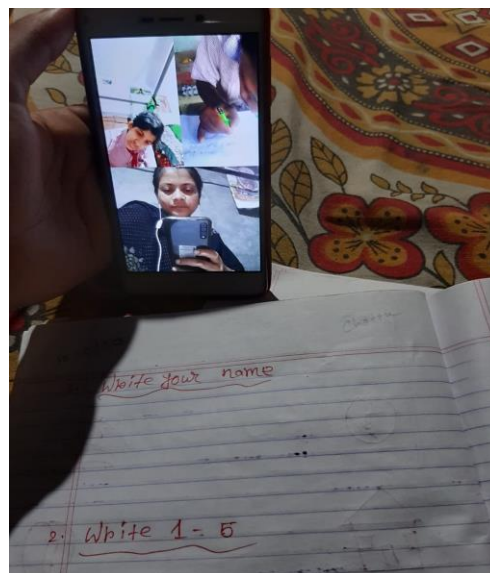

Figure No.-2: Teaching through Mobile Phone by IHBP

Parents were asked to help the students in their task if needed. Students from lower classes were taught based on the classroom methods like rhymes, playgroup, daily living activities, etc. and parents were made to participate.So the modalities followed were by way of explaining over mobile phones or virtual classroom by using different online mobile appsor video calling.Initially the students were facing problems as method of online class was new to them, but later on theadjusted with the new set-up.Parents were very much co-operative.

However, the biggest drawback of this teaching method in regard to differently-abled students is lack of face-to-face engagement with Teachers and other students which is more important forsuch children. Technical issues,struggling for adaptability, computer literacy and motivation ofteachers, parents and studentsposed additional challenges.

3. PUPA's Endeavour during Coronavirus Pandemic and Amphan Disaster in Sagardwip Island:

3.1 About PUPA :

Paribesh Unnayan Parishad (PUPA), a NGO with its registered office in Kolkata, operates mainly in Sagardwip, the biggest estuarian island in the Sunderbans delta. The island is located in the South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal and is some 100 km away from Kolkata. The frontline activity of PUPA is environmental conservation supplemented by integrated farming including promotion of traditional (desi) salt-resistant varieties of paddy and home-grown organic manure.PUPA also runs an informal school(pre-primary and primary) for less-privileged children of the island.The organisation follows the philosophy that *if a child cannot reach to the school, the school mustreach the child.* Thus the mission is to *empower children from marginalized cohort of society living in difficult circumstances by providing nature-based*

education and developing scientific awareness. The objective is to help them earn a dignified livelihood by using locally available bio-resources and build a self- reliant smart village when they grow up.

3.2 Impact of Coronavirus and Amphan on Sagardwip Island:

Sagardwip faced the double whammy of Coronavirus and Amphan. As the island was gradually coming to terms with the Carona-induced lockdown including return of migrant labourers, an unprecedented super cyclone 'Amphan' not seen in the last more than 100 years struck the entire State of West Bengal and more particularly its coastal areas. Under its impact Sagardwip was devastated beyond imagination.Corona-induced 'Lockdown' had already resulted in all the schools being closed. The children being first generation learners may drop out even when the schools reopen, as they remain out of touch with studies for a long period.

3.3 PUPA's Endeavour:

i)   PUPA identified around 100 school children belonging to two adjoining villages, *Sapkhali* and *Phulbari.* They were organized in 6 groups of 10-15 students each.Each group wasassigned to a volunteer educator havingexpertise to teach different subjects.West Bengal Board of Secondary Education released online study materials for different classes with model questions and answers, keeping the regular Annual exams, held at the end of the yearly academic calendar in mind. These online learning materials were to be transmitted to the educatorsof all the groups andnecessarysupport of an experienced teacher based in Kolkata, who has already initiated this process of learning, was to be sought.

Figure No. 3: Children studying in PUPA's office post-COVID

ii)   The volunteer educators were required to own smart phones and organize classes on 5 days (Monday-Friday) for 2-3 hours every day by maintaining social distance *(Figure No.3)* in the places near the students'residential areas.The Secretary,PUPA beingbased in Kolkata was to act as the admin for the WhatsApp groupformed for the purpose involving volunteer educators and students.The Secretary was tomonitor the progress of learning over WhatsApp message/video call every alternate day.PUPA was to pay some honorarium to each volunteer educator andalso serve some snacks to thestudents as an additional incentive for them to attend the classes.

iii)   The programme started and continued for a month (April,2020) when the unprecedented cyclone *'Amphan'* lashed out at Sagardwip and threw life in the island totally out of gear. However, this experiment isa lesson to PUPA and more so for the entire Sagardwip.Theisland is a cyclone-prone zone and the schools are 'locked-down' for a few days whenever such cyclones andheavy rainfalls occur.The Government, the schools and the civil society including the NGOsneed to chalk out feasible contingency plans so that loss of teaching-days during such natural calamities and public health emergencies can be minimized. This is all the more relevant as many of the children are first- generation learners.Once they miss the classes for a few days, they develop an apathy towards going to schools (and even reading books in their houses) when the schools reopen and this leads to drop-outs which is also a major issue confronting the island. Such drop-outs in their wake give rise to other social evils like early marriage, child-trafficking, child labour, thefts, pick-pocketing, etc.

4. Sudden Surge in Online Teaching-Learning :

The COVID-19 pandemic thrust an unprecedented lockdown across the globe. Our country also had to follow suit by imposing a strict lockdown although we were not much familiar with the word itself till it hit us almost like a comet. We were familiar with some more popular variants like quarantine and curfew often resorted to in dealing with individual health concerns and civil emergencies in different countries at various points of time. The reason was that the closest such situation the world has faced was hundred years back in the form of Spanish Flu. However, the world was a much quieter place then and international travels were very much restricted which used to be via ships. The travels were dominatedbytraders and soldiers. The soldiers' movements were necessitated as the imperialist powers had their colonies spread across the continents. Thus it was easier to contain the spread of Spanish Flu and the soldiers were quarantined in their ships. Even then the deadly Spanish Flu claimed almost 17-50 million lives in two phases and continued for two years. All these have acted in the back of our minds and have set the rationale for such a strict lockdown.

In the process amidst COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions across the country resorted to digital learning asschools, colleges and universities remained shut with teachers and students alike being holed up in their homes. Digital teaching/ learning took different forms as indicated through the case studies above. The forms depended on the mutual resources availableat the command of the teachers and thestudents. Thus in some cases, the teachers with the active tech support from their institutions wereholding virtual classes through different mobile apps.However, the less fortunate students had to make do by receiving recorded teaching sessions/lecture notes through WhatsApp or emails or other social media platforms. Even the still less fortunate students had to be contented with receiving guidance from the teachers orally over the phones of their parents. All these modes areclubbed under the genre of 'online teaching' for the purpose of this article.However, these modes stillleave sizeable segments of the student community who were deprived of teaching altogether. Sagardwip as mentioned above is a case in point. Its geographical isolation and the socio-economic profile of the population can be inferred as the dominant causes of the deprivation of the students there.

5. Traditional Classroom - vs - Online Teaching-Learning:

It is obvious that this sudden wave of online teaching owes itself to the strictest lockdown affected to contain the spread of Coronavirus. Online learning was in vogue earlier also but on a very limited scale and mostly as supplementary teaching inputs and for self-learning. But this lockdown led to a sweeping launch of online teaching from pre-primary to university levels even as a large number of teachers and guardians were caught totally off guard. Suddenly we find even toddlers grappling with this method of online learning even before they have got acclimatized to real-life classroom shared by peers. The entire landscape of education went for a radical shift. This shift was confined to not only academic activities, but also extra-curricular domain involving sports, swimming,fine arts, etc. However, there were apprehensions in different quarters about the feasibilityanddesirabilityof replacing classroom learning by online learning.

It may be feasible due to the advent of technology although online learning has heterogeneous features which we shall discuss later. However, the bigger challenge lies in its desirability. It needs to be emphasized that classroom learning is not just about content delivery of different subjects, but more importantly about personal interactions between the teachers and the students and among the students themselves.These personal interactions play a stellar role in building self-confidence and team spirit and develop EQ along with IQ of the students, which in turn contribute to shaping of rounded personality of the students.Thus they not only attain academic degrees, but get equipped to face real-life situations as they enter the professional fields. Hence the technology of online learning should be used very judiciously to supplement and not supplant classroom learning. Digital/ online learning can be effectively used in a self-

learning mode or for distance learning and adult education of neo-literates for whom attending classroom lectures on a regular basis may be difficult.

6. Heterogeneity of Online Teaching- Learning :

In the context of this sweeping lockdown, online learning has assumed a sort of generic nomenclature for all kinds of non-classroom learning as indicated above. We now delve into various forms of online learning.

At one end of the spectrum is the *'virtual classes'* made possible through some mobile apps which was resorted to mostly by the top-of-the-ladder schools, colleges and universities generally frequented by the well-off sections of the society. On the contrary, the vast sections of the student community were outside the domain of such 'virtual class'due to a host of reasons as brought out in the case studies which ranged from non-availability of requisite hardware to lack of internet connectivityof good quality with stable bandwidth,more particularly at the students' end. Even if these technical issues were sorted out, exclusive physical space required at home for undivided attention to the class posed challengefor many teachersand students.

This brings us to various improvisations made by different educational institutions and their teachers, keeping in mind the resources available. These efforts really merit utmost appreciation. Availabilityof smartphones with a considerable segment of people due to reasonably good telecom density in the country developed in the last decade or sohas made such experiments feasible. Social media through its various platforms has played a very significant role as revealed through the case studies above. So it becomes very pertinent to point out that for online teaching,technologyhas to be resorted to in its heterogeneous forms in keeping with the heterogeneous profile of our country in its various dimensions, viz. social, economic, technological, geographical,etc.

7. Concluding Remarks:

The foregoing paragraphs lead us the following observations-

i) Thisexercise of onlineteaching / learningcomes with its own set of challenges, given the lack ofhard resources and training in many cases and the softer psychological issues involved.

ii) This mode of online education during the prolonged national lockdown still under way,has been predominantly resorted to byschools particularly in urban areas and mostly the schools following ICSE/ISC and CBSE syllabi and attended by the students from the well-off sections of the society.

iii)   Incidentally, online learning in the schools particularly in the pre-primary and primary standards,whenthey are in an impressionistic age, may lead to a negative fall-out if the same is continued when the normal times return.

iv)   The online learning may hinder development of inter-personal relations due to absence of socialization and can thus affect mental and psychological healthof the students in the long run.

v)   It is reported in the media that several state governments have banned such online education for the pre- primary and primary standards which supports the apprehension expressed in point no. 4 above.

vi)   Online education cannot be made mandatory due to digital divide reflected in lack of quality Internet access and suitable hardware for many students.

vii)   Moreover, even if internet access of good quality is available, constraints of exclusive physical space at home(requiredfor undivided attention) can act as deterrents for many teachers and students particularly in metros.

viii)   In short, this method of online education can act as a temporary contingency measure to deal with such situations of health and other emergencies.

ix)   However, this online route can be very effectively used for distance learning of formal courses and non- formal adult learning particularly of neo-literates.

x)   In an epilogue, we offer a contingency plan for Sagardwip where the schools often face 'lockdown-like' situation due to recurrent cyclones and heavy rainfalls leading to closure of schools and loss of reading days by the children.

8. Epilogue: Contingency Plan for Sagardwip:

Now, we come back to the context of Sagardwip which suffers from physical isolation, as well as lack of goodqualitydigital connectivitycompounded by the weak socio-economic profile of the population. Hence, thereis need for appropriate improvisations to deal with educational dislocations arising out of recurrent natural disasters or otherwise as was seen recently. PUPA initiated some modest efforts to mitigate the negative consequences as indicated above. During post-Amphan period, the students were organized into Community Bio Circleto act as one of the local institutional pillars, others being farmers' club and Women's group. The members of the bio-circles were engaged in collecting seeds and planting trees. They were associated with the farmer's clubs to get practical knowledge of farming. The students participated in the field activities very enthusiastically. They will have access toonline training in scientific & sustainable integrated agriculture to be organized by PUPA shortly.

Incidentally, it may be mentioned that as part of their normal school curriculum of 'life science', the children are required to undertake such project work on different aspects of bio-diversity and learn its significance from a practical perspective. It is imperative that thoughts be given by

the schools, teachers and the NGOs so that the students can be involved in such exploratory nature-based project work when the schools remain closed due to rains or during summer vacation which couldbe supplemented by some online inputs alsoasavailable in public domain.

Since 2015-16 Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) is implementing a project titled "Attracting and Retaining Youth in Agriculture (ARYA)" in 25 states (one district in each state through the concerned KVK). Many experts are of the opinion that this is the most opportune time to win back the migrant youths to agriculture. Following the objective of ARYA, PUPA is also in the process of launching an innovative project titled "Smart Education and Project Shade & Seed" to motivate the youth to take up agriculture and allied activities as a profession and minimize their migration. The project will strive to involve the returnee migrants also.

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