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## Effect of Covid-19 Pandemic on the Education of Marginalized Communities Children in India

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### Abstract:

*The global nature of the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the whole world with the twin shocks of a health emergency and an economic recession. This global pandemic threatens children's rights across the world, including in India, and*

*exposes them to potential disruption to their education, healthcare, protection, and overall well-being. The pandemic has affected all parts of India and the situation has disproportionately affected the most vulnerable and marginalized people in the society. School closures, unstable employment, and inaccessible health services have caused huge disruptions to the education of the child and family wellbeing, especially for most marginalized and deprived children. The sudden lockdown had a severe impact on the education of millions of low-income migrant workers and daily wage parents' children. Across the country there is great inequality between the rich and poor, putting the poor at long-term risk. The current crisis has highlighted the inequalities within the education system, especially in terms of opportunities for continued learning as schools close. In India majority of the children were from rural backgrounds and they did not have Smartphone's, so the maximum school could not engage the majority of students via online platforms. Most disadvantaged children did not have any support to handle online education at home because their families combating deep livelihood crises. Domestic violence has spiralled since the lockdown, throughout India. It was very much needed to develop a distance learning strategy to ensure that the most marginalized children do not drop out. This study attempts to take a holistic lens by including the voices of the marginalized populations, such as migrants and internally displaced children, refugee children, child labourers, children without family care, especially children in a street situation, homeless children, and children with disability, etc. Inclusive education is a crucial component of broader social inclusion during this crisis. It is expected that marginalized children or children from poorer families will be less likely to return to school when the school is re-open, which could further increase the educational gap between students from more and less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds. So, it was foremost important for adopting a holistic approach to education.*

**Keywords:** *vulnerable, marginalized, crisis, pandemic, healthcare, socio-economic, holistic, communities, inclusion, emergency.*

### 1. Introduction:

The current Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is having a deep impact, not only on people's health but also on how they learn, work, and live. School closures have a very real impact on all

students, but especially on the most vulnerable ones who are more likely to face extra barriers. Children and youth from low-income and single-parent families; immigrants, refugees, ethnic minority and indigenous backgrounds; with diverse gender identities, and those with special education needs suffer by being deprived of physical learning opportunities and social-emotional support available in schools.<sup>1</sup> Challenges have been immense as no one has been able to predict the potential impact of the COVID-19 infection on health, including children's health and its transmission rates. Even India is leading the manufacturing of vaccines globally. This study considers the direct effects of school closures and reopening and pays particular attention to the most disadvantaged groups who will be disproportionately affected by the pandemic. Some of the most vulnerable children felt the side effects of COVID-19 from the moment nationwide lockdowns were put in place to control the spread of the disease. Markets, workshops, farms, and factories closed, leaving children and families stranded. For many, the fear and uncertainty continue. Save the children India had a history of being the first responder to any crisis that affects children in their community adversely. The same applies to the present health emergency that has impacted all but some more than the others. All our resources, support staff, the government, partner NGOs, civil society, local communities, families, and health experts have joined forces to stand up firmly in solidarity and support of the most affected and vulnerable marginalized children living on the fringes struggling to make their way out of this emergency undamaged. The government has made huge efforts to respond to the challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic. The government must be taken the necessary steps for improving the most marginalized students learning experiences through targeted effort. The most common practices to foster equity and inclusion have been the distribution of electronic devices with an internet connection is poor or remote areas, the distribution of free meals for eligible students, financial support for students and their families, and the extension of the availability of multi-language educational resources.

## 2. Objectives of the study:

- i. To understand the educational status of marginalized children during the COVID-19 pandemic in India.
- ii. To find out the problems faced by marginalized children during the COVID-19 situation
- iii. To evaluate the issues and challenges to the education of marginalized children during the COVID-19 crisis in India.
- iv. To compare the different opportunities between the various marginalized communities' children in India.

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<sup>1</sup>The impact of COVID-19 on student equity and inclusion: Supporting vulnerable students during school closures and school reopenings. Retrieved on 25.01.2022 from- [www.oecd.org/coronavirus/en/policy-responses](http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/en/policy-responses)

- v. To provide suggestions to solve the problems faced by marginalized children in their education during the COVID-19 crisis in India.

### **3. Methodology:**

The study entitled effect of the covid-19 pandemic on the education of marginalized communities' children in India. The present paper is a micro-level and descriptive in nature. This study aims to fill key gaps and update and triangulate some of the findings. The method of this present study is qualitative and analytic. Discussions with experts from part of the research work. A review of related literature and content analysis is applied to collect data. Required information is collected from different secondary sources like various national & international journals, several official websites of Governmental agencies and organizations, books, individuals, published records, scientific data, reports & articles. The documentary analysis technique is used to analyze data. As these secondary sources have obvious limitations in sampling and dimensional studies.

### **4. Area of the study:**

The purpose of this study is to assess the perceived impact on student learning of marginalized children due to school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic, and ways to better support student learning now and once the schools re-open. This paper was also finds out the various challenges & threats are facing the different marginalized and vulnerable children during the COVID-19 crisis and also provides some suggestions and strategies to overcome of those challenges. For writing, this article paper researcher has selected some state and their Government policy, initiatives, and recommendations in respect of fighting the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **5. Data collection & Analyzed:**

The present study is purely theoretical and descriptive in nature. The individual experiences have been analyzed thoroughly to get every aspect related to the given issue. This is such an essential issue about which we get a lot of experiences in our surrounding society, community as well as affected people by this pandemic. The researcher also used for empirical analysis materials have been collected from the newspaper, websites, journals, research & article papers, books, government & private reports, articles.

### **6. Findings of the study:**

The finding of the study will enlighten the effect of the covid-19 pandemic on the education of marginalized communities' children in India. The finding of the study shows that the COVID-19 pandemic threatens children's rights across the all over state in India, and exposes them to

potential disruptions to their education, healthcare, protection, and overall welfare. Especially the situation has disproportionately affected the most vulnerable and marginalized children in the society. Children are missing out on social interaction with friends, peers, family members, teachers, and adult caregivers. According to reports, girls have also suffered. The result of this paper also shows that school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic triggered serious challenges for education systems to respond to the needs of marginalized student groups whose learning and well-being supposed to be the most impacted. The study recommends for special attention of Government and policymakers to design programs for disseminating educational awareness & opportunities among marginalized children, parents, and their communities to reinforce their participation in mainstream education during this COVID-19 crisis. The future researcher will get a new platform for designing their studies which is a very concerned field in a recent issue. The Government has made huge efforts to respond to the effects of COVID-19, and its commitment to education is reflected in the 2020 NEP.

#### 7. Context: The current scenario of COVID-19 in India:

School closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was triggered significant challenges for education systems to respond to the needs of vulnerable marginalized student groups whose learning and well-being tend to be the most impacted. According to the United Nations Educational, scientific and cultural organization (UNESCO), over 800 million learners from around the world have been affected.<sup>2</sup> In India, it has left over 286 million students from pre-primary to upper secondary school out of school since March 2020.<sup>3</sup> In India, more than 10 million COVID-19 cases have been recorded to date. India is the second most impacted country in the world after the United States but with far fewer recorded deaths. The first case was officially recorded on 30 January 2020; India went into full lockdown on 24 March. The sudden lockdown had a severe impact on millions of low-income poor, disadvantaged, vulnerable families and migrant, daily-wage workers' families'.<sup>4</sup> As most schools continue to remain closed, and students, parents, and educators are becoming increasingly concerned. While the COVID crisis unfolds, saving the children is mounting a long-term and comprehensive response for marginalized children and their families in India. We are going the extra mile in these uncertain times. COVID-19 has hit us all hard, but the situation is has been the more testing for those living on the fringes of society, the most vulnerable marginalized children, and their communities. The education of children cannot be done effectively in online mode during the crisis and to do so would damage education deeply and enhance inequalities. Especially the most vulnerable students might not

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<sup>2</sup> Impact of covid19 on education - Education and covid-19 crisis. Retrieved on 15.02.2022 from- [www.campaignforeducation.org/education/covid-19](http://www.campaignforeducation.org/education/covid-19)

<sup>3</sup> The Economic Times (2020). Delhi schools closed: All primary schools shut as coronavirus spreads. Retrieved on 28.01.2022 from- [www.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation](http://www.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation)

<sup>4</sup> Brookings. (2020) How well is India responding to COVID-19? Retrieved from- <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2020/07/02/how-well-is-india-responding-to-covid-19>

have access to digital learning resources, some state government and civil society organizations have provided these students with computers or tablets as well as internet access, or they have organized teaching through television, phones, or radio. A 2019 report found that only 32% of the rural population of 12+ years and 54% of the urban population had internet access, and only 11% of Indian households have computers such as desktops, laptops, and tablets (excluding smartphones).<sup>5</sup> A status report on schools during COVID-19 indicated that children studying in government schools were hit particularly hard, with more than 80 % of government school students in Odisha, Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Uttar Pradesh not receiving any educational materials during the lockdown.<sup>6</sup> This failure was mostly because many poor families did not have access to digital devices and e-learning tools. In homes, WhatsApp was the main digital access and the primary mode for delivering education in both public and private schools, followed by mobile phone calls between teachers and students. In April 2020 the Ministry of human resource Development (renamed the Ministry of Education from July 2020) was presented Alternative Academic Calendar (AAC) guidelines on continuing formal education online in the 2020-21 academic year.

### 7.1 Internet and mobile connectivity in India before the COVID-19 crisis:

[Nielsen & Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI). Digital in India: 2019 – Round 2 Reports]

- 54 percent of urban and 32 percent of the rural population of 12+ years had internet access.
- 99 percent of both urban and rural internet users aged 12+ years used mobile phones to access the internet.
- 11 percent of Indian households have computers such as desktops, laptops, and tablets (excluding smartphones)
- 24 percent of households have internet facilities, including unlimited broadband connections.

*Source: Nielsen and IAMIA, 2019<sup>7</sup>*

### 7.2 Availability & Usage of Digital Learning Tools Through Multiple Channels:

For all marginalized families, affordability and connectivity are key constraints for accessing remote learning available using high-tech tools during this pandemic. Parents report that data costs, device affordability, and poor network connectivity are key challenges to using remote learning opportunities. The report also shows that many students are not yet using remote learning for so many reasons. This means they have not used any of the following tools for

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<sup>5</sup> Nielsen & Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI). Digital in India: 2019 – Round 2 Reports. Retrieved on 15.02.2022 from- [www.cms.iamai.in/Content/ResearchPapers/2286f4d7-424f-4bde-be88-6415fe5021d5.pdf](http://www.cms.iamai.in/Content/ResearchPapers/2286f4d7-424f-4bde-be88-6415fe5021d5.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Oxfam India (2020). Status Report: Government and Private Schools During COVID-19. Retrieved on 15.01.2022 from- [www.oxfamindia.org/knowledgehub/oxfaminaction/status-report-government-and-private-schools-during-covid-19](http://www.oxfamindia.org/knowledgehub/oxfaminaction/status-report-government-and-private-schools-during-covid-19)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid:Footnote-5

remote learning since the schools shut down: textbooks, worksheets, phone or video calls, learning programs on TV or radio, YouTube videos, video classes, learning applications (e.g., DIKSHA), WhatsApp to access materials or connect with teachers, other websites, blogs, and reading materials. A significant proportion of students are using tools in general but not for learning. This gap is especially large for smartphones and TV. While radio is often used as an easily accessible tool for especially low-income household children but most students today are not using it in general or for learning which is a big matter.<sup>8</sup>

### 7.3 Access to widely and easily remote learning tools through different educational stakeholders:

Over the past six months, India's education sector has witnessed a surge in solutions to support the continued learning of students with marginalized groups during the COVID-19 lockdown.

This includes some core remote learning solutions like<sup>9</sup>:-

- Traditional tools such as textbooks and home visits.
- Teach-enabled and mass communication solutions such as WhatsApp, YouTube, radio, and TV.
- Blended solutions that combine face-to-face with e-learning as well as other essential solutions such as distributions of mid-day meals, distributions of sanitation kits, and monetary support.

### 7.4 Role of community in providing remote learning tools:

For students who do not have direct access to remote learning, community members are proactively pooling in resources. Neighborhood bonds play a crucial role in providing access to remote learning tools for those kinds of poor and vulnerable households that don't have their own textbooks, or digital or mass communication devices.<sup>10</sup>

## 8. Various challenging areas for different kinds of marginalized group children & their protection:

### 8.1 Students from marginalized communities:

Students from marginalized families use remote learning at lower levels than the rest of the population. Scheduled castes (SC), scheduled tribes (ST), and below poverty line (BPL) students

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<sup>8</sup> (UNICEF), Rapid Assessment of Learning During School Closures in the Context of COVID-19, 2021 New Delhi, India. Retrieved on 25.01.2022 from- [www.unicef.org/india/reports/rapid-assessment-learning-during-school-closures-context-covid-19](http://www.unicef.org/india/reports/rapid-assessment-learning-during-school-closures-context-covid-19)

<sup>9</sup> Retrieved on 25.01.2022 from- [www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/igo/](http://www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/igo/) or [www.unesco.org/open-access/terms-use-ccbysa-en](http://www.unesco.org/open-access/terms-use-ccbysa-en)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid: Footnote-8

have lower usage than the average. From the sample, there is little difference between girls' and boys' usage of remote learning.<sup>11</sup>

### 8.2 Migrant children:

The pandemic and lockdown have affected an estimated 40 million migrant workers and others working in the informal sector (90 % of India's population is engaged in this sector).<sup>12</sup> The migrant workers have either moved back home with their children or are unable to send remittances home this season. The move toward technology-driven distance learning is preventing many migrant children from continuing their education during school closure. In March 2020, the governments of 27 states launched migrant portals to track the movement of migrants.<sup>13</sup>

### 8.3 Vulnerable groups:

The COVID-19 crisis has meant limited or no education for many children who already experienced barriers in their path of education especially children with disabilities, students in remote locations, children of migrant workers, refugees, and asylum seekers, or those whose families have lost their source of livelihood and incomes. This could force many children to discontinue their studies even after 'normality' is returned. Children with disabilities are one of the most vulnerable groups in India. According to a survey conducted by the national center for the promotion of Employment for Disabled people, many children with disabilities do not have access to online services. Many of them come from families with low socioeconomic profiles. **Parents are also unable to help as many of those children are first-generation learners.**<sup>14</sup> In government primary schools, enrolment for girls is higher than for boys. Given the strong son preference, whereas boys may be supported by families to go to school despite the economic crisis at home, older girls are more likely to be discouraged from going back to school so that they can with domestic take care. Such girls might also be forced into early marriages.

### 8.4 Gender-based violence and violence against children:

Pandemics tend to increase the risk of gender-based violence for women, and violence against vulnerable, marginalized children. Physical distancing, restrictions on mobility, fear of getting

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<sup>11</sup> Centre for Budget and Policy Studies, Life in the Time of COVID-19, Mapping the impact of Covid-19 on the lives of school going children especially girls in India. Retrieved on 25.01.2022 from- <http://www.cbps.in/news/life-in-the-time-of-covid-19-report-has-been-released>

<sup>12</sup> Chatham House, International Affairs Think Tank (2020). COVID-19: The Hidden Majority in India's Migration Crisis. Retrieved on 28.01.2022 from <http://www.https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/07/covid-19-hidden-majority-indias-migration-crisiss>

<sup>13</sup> The New Indian Express. Ensuring education for migrant children. Retrieved on 20.02.2022 from - [www.newindianexpress.com/opinions/2020/jul/22](http://www.newindianexpress.com/opinions/2020/jul/22).

<sup>14</sup> National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People (NCPEDP) (2020). Locked Down and Left Behind, A report on the status of persons with disabilities in India during the COVID-19 crisis. Retrieved on 15.02.2022 from- [www.ncpedp.org/](http://www.ncpedp.org/)



infected, captivity at home, coupled with increased tensions and economic stress all increase the risk of gender-based violence, especially in poor, deprived, and marginalized communities. The national commission for women recorded a more than two-fold surge in complaints of violence against women and girls in the week following the lockdown.<sup>15</sup> Of the calls received by the ChildLine India helpline, nearly 30 percent were seeking protection against abuse and violence towards children.<sup>16</sup>

### **8.5 Teachers are engaging less hence family support becomes more important – but everyone can not engage equally:**

On average, students engage with their teachers at a certain time, and a significant minority and deprived groups are not in touch with teachers at all – especially marginalized students in rural areas and even in government schools during the Covid-19 situation. Remote learning was reduces opportunities for students and teachers to engage directly. Many parents reported that they can try to engage more to help their children learn when schools are closed, but they face so many challenges. However, many parents feel they do have not enough equipped to fully support their child in remote learning. Especially these challenges are further increased for working and less educated parents even so many parents have lost income during this crisis and are unable to meet day to day expenses along with school fees. Parents believed that their efforts alone are not enough and teachers' face-to-face supervision and engagement must be crucial to improving the quality of learning.

### **8.6 Children's Health conditions during the Covid-19 time:**

India has 120 million children enrolled in the midday meal scheme in over 1.26 million schools across the nation.<sup>17</sup> This meal is a huge incentive for many children to attend school, especially for marginalized and deprived children but lockdown and COVID-19 related disruptions have prevented the initiative in many states and union territories, thereby depriving children of what is often the most nutritious meal of their day. Besides learning deficiency, school closures have hugely affected students' mental health. The report shows that over the majority of children and adolescents have poor or very poor mental health. The report suggests that social isolation, disruption to learning, and family financial insecurity are key reasons for poor mental well-being.

### **8.7 Reopening the school with consideration of Health and well-being:**

The ministry of education had provided guidelines for reopening schools advice on how to resume the cooking and serving of midday meals in school with a focus on food safety, health,

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<sup>15</sup> Domestic Violence Cases across India Swell since Corona virus Lockdown. Retrieved on 15.01.2022 from- <http://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-rise-in>

<sup>16</sup> The Hindu. Coronavirus lockdown, Govt. helpline receives 92,000 calls on child abuse and violence in 11 days. Retrieved on 15.02.2022 from- <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/coronavirus-lockdown-govt-helpline>

<sup>17</sup> The BMJ, COVID-19 pandemic: implications of school closures on children in India. Retrieved on 15.01.2022 from <http://www.https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2020/08/1>



and hygiene along with physical distancing. According to guidelines, schools should not conduct formal assessments for at least two or three weeks after reopening. Even when they do, it is ensuring the emotional well-being of the students meet. Assessments in the form of role plays, choreography, class quiz, puzzles and games, brochure designing, presentations, portfolios, etc., may be preferred over routine pen-paper testing.<sup>18</sup>

### **8.8 Operations –WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene):**

The Right to Education Act 2009<sup>19</sup> was mandates "barrier-free access, separate toilets for boys and girls, and safe and adequate drinking water facility for all children." However, there are still many schools that lack usable facilities. Following the nature of the current health crisis, all schools will have to ensure that they have running water for drinking and hand washing, and usable toilets for boys and girls, once schools reopen. This will be a challenge in many remote rural areas where the infrastructure is poor and will be expensive to develop. It will be important for the government to take a pragmatic approach to provide basic WASH facilities in schools to make them safe for reopening.

## **9. Long term & Short-term solutions for overcoming the challenges:**

Save the children's response to COVID-19 in India is currently focused on multi-level risk mitigation:

### **9.1 In the short-term solutions, as schools are about to re-open:**

- Bringing immediate and short-term relief, food security, health a& hygiene kits, and more
- Enabling continued education, health & nutrition, and protection to most affected children and their families.
- Conduct gender-responsive re-enrolment campaigns to prevent students from dropping out and support to relieve financial challenges.
- Count the number of students coming back to school, keeping a special track of girls and boys who do not come back.
- Support students by assessing their learning levels and catching them up through remedial education and teaching at the right level.
- Provide non-academic support such as mental wellness and career guidance counseling.

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<sup>18</sup>Ministry of Health. SOP/Guidelines for Health and Safety Protocols for Reopening of Schools. Retrieved on 15.02.2022 from- [www.covid19.india.gov.in/document/sop-guidelines-for-health-and-safety-protocols-for-reopening-of-schools-and-learning-with-physical-social-distancing/](http://www.covid19.india.gov.in/document/sop-guidelines-for-health-and-safety-protocols-for-reopening-of-schools-and-learning-with-physical-social-distancing/)

<sup>19</sup> Retrieved on 15.02.2022 from- [www.legislative.gov.in](http://www.legislative.gov.in)

## 9.2 From the long-term perspective, to further strengthen the system:

- Ensuring long-term support for the most affected marginalized communities, including mental health for children, livelihood for caregivers, and providing continued education and learning.
- To develop lighter applications that can be downloaded on low-cost smartphones and operate with 2G internet.
- Improve basic digital infrastructure in schools and continue to invest in connecting remote areas to the digital ecosystem.
- Improve learning outcomes through blended learning approaches.

## 10. An important initiative was taken by the Government & private sectors:

The central and state governments have launched a range of initiatives for continued remote learning. The central government has created repositories of learning content such as **DIKSHA**<sup>20</sup> (a digital infrastructure for school education), **SWAYAM**<sup>21</sup>, **e-pathshala**<sup>22</sup>, etc., to drive access. State governments have the responsibility for implementing the policies and guidelines developed by the central government. Responses to COVID-19, therefore, vary by state, with solutions for learning continuity tailored to local needs: Gujarat focused on distributing QR-coded textbooks; Bihar and Uttar Pradesh focused on learning programs on TV; Assam distributed worksheets along with midday meals; Kerala also focused on textbook distribution and WhatsApp groups.<sup>23</sup> Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) are providing some innovative solutions using blended tools and supporting students' mental well-being, though their reach is limited to their beneficiary base.

### 10.1 Providing equitable and inclusive access to digital learning resources:

An almost universal response to school closures has been the creation of online learning platforms to support teachers, students, and their families. However, not all students have the same access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), which also varies greatly across the different states of India. Though the most vulnerable students might not have access to digital learning resources, some state governments and civil society organizations have provided these students with computers or tablets as well as internet access, or they have organized teaching through television, phones, or radio.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Retrieved on 25.01.2022 from- [www.diksha.gov.in/](http://www.diksha.gov.in/) or [www.seshagun.gov.in/shagun](http://www.seshagun.gov.in/shagun)

<sup>21</sup>Retrieved on 25.01.2022 from- [www.swayam.gov.in](http://www.swayam.gov.in)

<sup>22</sup>Retrieved on 25.01.2022 from- [www.epahshala.nic.in](http://www.epahshala.nic.in) or [www.epahshala.gov.in](http://www.epahshala.gov.in)

<sup>23</sup>Ibid:Footnote-8

<sup>24</sup>OECD (2020). Learning remotely when schools close: How well are students and schools prepared? Insight from PISA, Tackling Corona virus (COVID-19): Contributing to a Global Effort. Retrieved on 15.02.2022 from- [www.oecd.org/coronavirus](http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus)

### 10.2 Distributing information and providing online resources in different languages:

Language can be an important barrier to the inclusion in education of some diverse student groups, mainly for those from an immigrant background and some indigenous and tribal communities. Language is an essential component of educational policy to guarantee not only improved educational outcomes, but also the well-being, sense of belonging, and self-worth of these student groups.<sup>25</sup> Most state governments have worked on communicating information on health and education with the COVID-19 through different indigenous languages.

### 10.3 Offering equitable and inclusive access to extra services for marginalized and vulnerable students:

A broad approach to well-being must consider the socio-economic impact of the pandemic on families and the wider community as well as its effect on education. During the pandemic, ensuring extra services to vulnerable students is crucial to foster equity, inclusion, and their well-being. It can make an authentic difference in the lives of students coming from low socio-economic backgrounds and help prevent broadening educational gaps. To support these students, many states have taken initiative, often in partnership with local authorities, and organizations, and resorting to emergency funds. Free school meal distribution programs conducted by various state governments have proven to have an effective positive impact on marginalized students' educational outcomes.

### 10.4 Ensuring that socio-emotional needs are being met:

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted that schools are not only crucial as an education provider, but also as a place to respond to socio-emotional needs and support the well-being of vulnerable students. Schools can ideally be a safe space for vulnerable students, providing psychological support, responding to their socialization needs, and creating a sense of community. The lack of social contact can be particularly impactful for vulnerable students especially those with broken families, abusive families, in foster care, suffering from food insecurity, or lacking housing. The COVID-19 crisis may trigger symptoms of anxiety or other forms of mental disorders in children, students with SEN, and in particular those who struggle with social and communication problems such as students with different kinds of disabilities. They need routine, regularity, and social interaction to be able to manage their mood symptoms. During school closures, many state governments have attempted to respond to the well-being needs of different vulnerable student groups.

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<sup>25</sup>OECD (2017). Promising practices in supporting success for indigenous students. Paris: OECD publishing. Retrieved on 10.02.2022 from [www.dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264279421-en](http://www.dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264279421-en)

### 10.5 Encouraging return to schools:

School re-opening will probably be, voluntarily, as the health risks will perhaps not have reduced enough to impose mandatory attendance. The absenteeism of vulnerable students could be linked to disengagement in education, but also to the fact that poorer and disadvantaged families have been disproportionately hit by this health emergency in various states of India. It could be significant for every state to introduce a system of incentives to promote attendance, in especially for more vulnerable students.

### 10.6 Addressing learning gaps:

School closures might have created new educational gaps or increased already existing situations. The evidence is clear that students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are the ones likely to suffer most. Likewise, particular groups of diverse students (e.g. students from specific ethnic groups, child laborers, children without family care, students with SEN, etc.) who are already marginalized will be highly impacted.

### 10.7 Co-operation between relevant authorities, civil society, and agencies to respond to vulnerable student's needs:

Re-opening schools safely while ensuring that no student is left behind will require strong partnerships between relevant ministries and state agencies. Co-operation between formal institutions and civil society organizations is also important. Local authorities and organizations have co-operated with various associations to distribute hygiene kits, food, and educational material to vulnerable marginalized students and their communities. Grass –root organizations and NOs hold important actors who work on the ground.

### 10.8 Social protection scheme:

The COVID-19 pandemic underlined the structural changes in India's social protection system, which is fragmented and hugely implemented through complex centrally sponsored schemes. The government is to be praised for spreading the social assistance under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana, providing a package of cash and in-kind of social assistance to protect poor and vulnerable households. While India's social protection programs span major life stages, there are notable limitations in reach and impact – even before the start of the pandemic, only 39% of eligible women with newborns received maternity benefits under the Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY). And the majority of India's workforce is informal and without social protection.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Government of India, Ministry of Labour& Employment. Employment in formal sector and conditions of Informal Employment, volume-4. Retrieved on 15.01.2022 from-  
[www.labour.gov.in/sites/default/files/Report%20vol%204z20final.pdf](http://www.labour.gov.in/sites/default/files/Report%20vol%204z20final.pdf).

## 11. Policy options and suggestions to ensure equity and inclusion during school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic

### 11.1 Providing equitable and inclusive access to digital learning resources:

- **Partnerships with national educational media (TV channels, Radio Channels)** - to reach as many learners as possible.
- **Free online learning resources to reach all learners:** Developing free educational content to be offered online. Facilitating partnerships with national telecom companies to provide free use of mobile data.
- **Distributing of free electronic devices and learning material:** Distributing free electronic devices and providing internet connection to disadvantaged and vulnerable students, including migrant children and to students living in remote areas.

### 11.2 Facilitating information in different languages:

- **Information on health and education:** Offering online or distributing physical information on the pandemic and education-related issues in different languages to reach diverse populations through partnerships with grass-root organizations.
- **Multi-lingual learning resources:** Offering online educational resources in different languages (e.g. indigenous languages) and using culturally-adapted resources with the help of specialists and translators.

### 11.3 Ensuring that socio-emotional needs are being met: Counseling options and socialization opportunities: providing remote counseling services (e.g., virtual meetings, hotlines) to support the psychological and socio-emotional well-being of vulnerable students.

### 11.4 Offering equitable and inclusive access to extra services for vulnerable students:

- **Financial support:** Creating emergency funds for vulnerable students and their families. Providing extra funding to local authorities to support vulnerable children.
- **Free school meals:** ensuring the continuity of distributing free school meals for disadvantaged and vulnerable groups of students, in collaboration with local governments.

## 12. Necessary guidelines & suggestions for providing a better education environment for the marginalized children:

- Support education of disadvantaged students.
- Ensure distribution of food to students.
- Support learners at risk of violence at home.

- Improve the learning experiences of children from marginalized groups.
- Ensure social development of vulnerable students.
- Ensuring financial support and free school meals.
- Address the emotional needs of students.
- Ensure the continuity of the academic learning of students
- Arrange counselling sessions and socialization opportunities to support marginalized children and their families.
- Drive re-enrolment campaigns to prevent students from dropping out.
- Preparing to cater to students with a wide range of learning losses.
- Developing lighter applications that can be downloaded on low-cost smartphones and operate with 2G internet.
- Civil society organizations (CSOs) can support the government with last-mile delivery, particularly among marginalized groups by working with local institutions like self-help Groups (SHGs), ASHA, etc.

### 13. Conclusion:

To conclude it can be said that the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures have affected millions of children from pre-primary to secondary levels of schooling. Especially most affected those children who are belonging to the disadvantaged, marginalized, vulnerable society. School closures related to the current COVID-19 pandemic mean that students from diverse backgrounds who are more at risk of increased vulnerability are less likely to receive the support and extra services they need. With lockdown, children miss out on the joy of play and interactions, sports, and talking with friends. These extracurricular activities are equally essential to a child's growth as academic studies are not created through distance learning. A school also provides essential basic services (such as midday meals, immunization, and health checks) that are difficult to an alternative. It created so many barriers to the education of marginalized, vulnerable children because they are dependent on those resources. This study reveals that a significant percentage of students have been 'lost' in the process of school closures and growing evidence shows that disadvantaged and vulnerable students have on average significantly less engaged in remote learning. During the pandemic, ensuring extra services to vulnerable students is crucial to foster equity, inclusion, and their well-being. It was necessary for adopting a holistic approach to education. The holistic approach means responding to students' needs must be based on a whole-school and whole-community-based approach. To overcome those challenges they face, the Government must be taken all the necessary steps for the betterment of marginalized, vulnerable children's life as well as their education. The well-being of students is seas a priority by several state governments. This study briefly focuses on India's initiative and provides recommendations for government to respond to the educational needs of the most

vulnerable students during and after the COVID-19 situation. It might allow education systems to identify the groups that have been hit the hardest by the crisis and the initiatives that were the most effective in responding to their needs.

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