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E-LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN PANDEMIC TRAPPED INDIA: A STUDY ON TWO HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract:

Indian education system has faced a major challenge during COVID-19 Pandemic owing to the fact that consecutive phases of Lockdown. Due to the closure of most of the educational institutions, the conventional education system has been severely damaged. However, this COVID-19 pandemic situation has paved the way for e-learning and made it more popular. E-learning is a general term used to refer to a type of learning where the instructor and the student are separated by space or time where the gap between the two is bridged through the use of online technologies. But the striking question is, has online education strengthened the digital divide? Digital divide addresses the gap between those who have access to the information technology, and those who do not. Technological advancement or use of ICT in educational environment may create the gaps or divides known as digital divides.

This paper focuses on the two major themes, that is, the concept of e-learning or online learning and the concept of digital divide and second one is, whether e-learning is strengthened or narrowing this digital divide. This paper also tries to identify the major causes for digital divide in educational environment and tries to suggest some possible solutions to overcome this situation.

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1.0 Introduction:

The emergence of COVID-19 Pandemic has affected every aspect of our social life. The widespread outbreak of this contagion corona virus in early 2020 creates many dissensions about the normal functioning of the world. This situation pauses the wheels of development which was not witnessed even in the two World Wars.

This pandemic situation changes everything including teaching-learning process in traditional classroom environment. According to a UNESCO report, more than 32 crore students in India are affected by the closure of schools and colleges, caused by COVID-19.

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Moreover, students belonging to the marginalized sections of society are becoming its victims. This situation forces higher education institutions to adapt to new methods of teaching and ensure uninterrupted supply of curriculum. The only possible solution to the current scenario can be the technology-mediated online class.

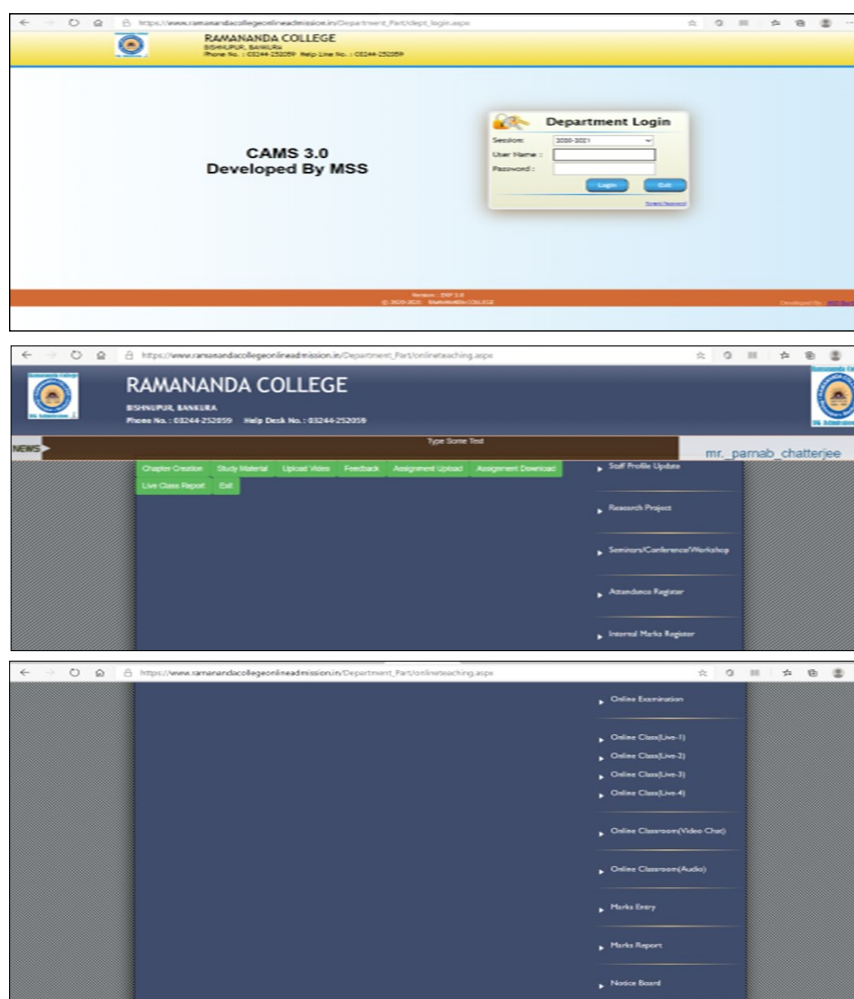
2.0 E-Learning and Digital Divide:

The idea of e-Learning is to create a learning environment using ICT, where the instructor and student are separated by space or time but the gap between the two is bridged through the use of online technology-based online classes

Nowadays, e-Learning in the higher educational institution, termed as e-classroom, that is, online classroom where teachers and students can log in from anywhere and anytime and do their class-work. Higher educational institution uploaded a link in their website where teachers and students can log in and use this e-classroom environment.

For instance we can site technological upgrading of e-classroom facility provided by Ramananda College, Bishnupur and Dr. Meghnad Saha College Itahar, Uttar Dinajpur:

Fig. 1: Ramananda College e-classroom portal screenshots:

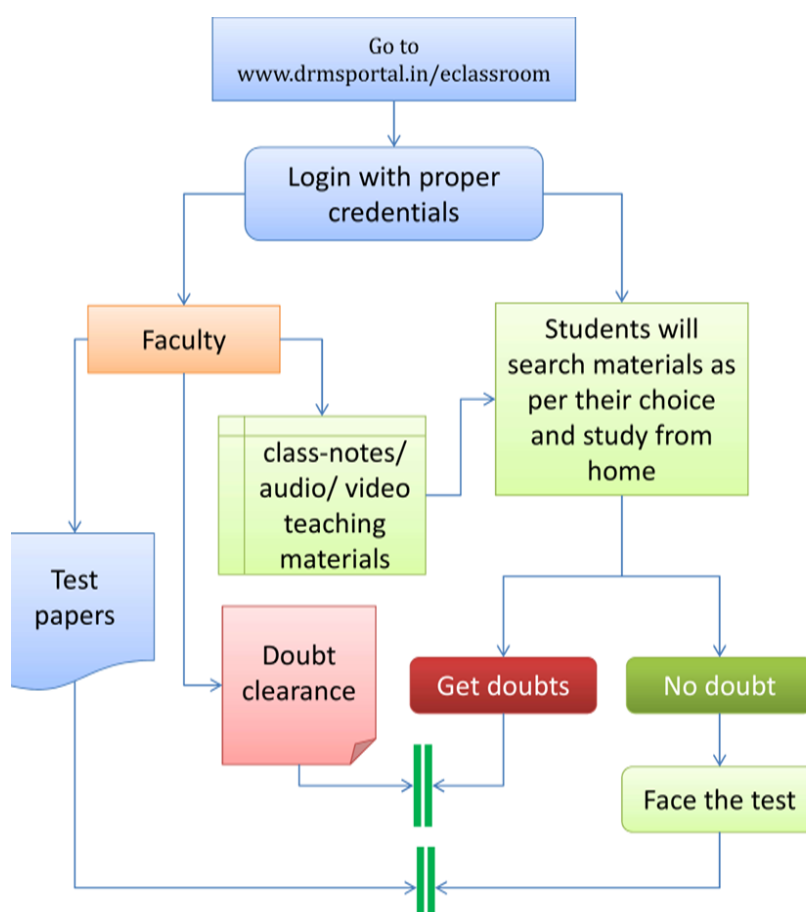


(Source: [https://www.ramanandacollegeonlineadmission.in/Department Part/dept_login.aspx](https://www.ramanandacollegeonlineadmission.in/Department%20Part/dept_login.aspx))

In the Website of Ramananda College, a special tab is available for online learning and it is user id protected ([https://www.ramanandacollegeonlineadmission.in/Department Part/dept_login.aspx](https://www.ramanandacollegeonlineadmission.in/Department_Part/dept_login.aspx)). Teachers can log in with their user-id and password and use classroom online tab for online classes. There are many options like upload video and study material, Assignment upload and download, video chat (after sharing the created link) etc for smooth running of online classes.

Library of Ramananda College introduced 'e-Content' and 'e-Resources' tab in the main website of Ramananda College. In this 'e-Content' page our library has enriched by collecting the study material from various departments in the form of Word, PPTs, PDF and upload it under 'e-Content' tab. Library also creates Model Question (CBCS) under 'e-Content' tab where model questions developed by departmental teachers of various subjects were uploaded.

Fig. 2: Dr. Meghnad Saha College
e-classroom flowchart



(Source: Authors' computation)

This flowchart was created by Dr. Meghnad Saha College for smooth and hassle-free running of the e-learning or online learning environment.

This pandemic situation forces every educational institution to adopt and utilize the e-learning environment and this leads the pre-existing gap or divide called Digital divide.

Encyclopedia Britannica defines Digital Divide as, uneven or unequal distribution of ICT in the society. The simple way we can say that, Digital Divide is the knowledge gaps between people

with access the information and those people without. The gap in Internet access between rich and poor leads to dramatic inequalities in educational success. This gap has come to be known as the '*digital divide*'.

Traditionally Indian educational system has many divides in the terms of class, caste, language, region, developmental (urban and rural) and gender divides. Technological advancement creates another category of divide namely digital divide.

There are mainly three types of divide I) Gender Divide, II) Social Divide and III) Universal Access Divide. There are also some gap exists in our educational sector that is, 1) Educational institution does not have modern technology to provide online learning facility to its pupil, 2) Educational institution does have modern technology to provide online learning facility but lack internet access like fiber connection, subsidized data plan packages. 3) Lack of devices like Laptops, Tablets and other e-learning devices. 4) Lack of technology based skills of teaching staff and students.

Now the question arise that whether this pandemic situation strengthening the Digital divide?

Dream a dream published a report on digital divide and e- learning that "On June 2, a Class 9 student from Malappuram, in Kerala, allegedly committed suicide because she was upset that she could not afford to attend the online classes".

This one incident paints the picture of the real situation. Yes online learning in this pandemic situation strengthening the Digital divide.

2.1 Causes of digital divide in India:

There are multifarious causes for digital divide in educational environment;

- The first one is digital literacy; a report by the Digital Empowerment Foundation indicates that 30 percent of our population lags on basic literacy and thrice that for digital literacy.
- The second cause for digital divide in educational environment is access to internet and lack of digital infrastructure. Poorest students do not have access to smart phones and if they do, the net connectivity is poor and content is often not available in vernacular languages .
- There is also gender discrimination in accessing to internet; a report by Mobile association of India indicates that 33% of women have access to internet compared to men 67%.
- The next cause is economic barrier; a report by the Digital Empowerment Foundation indicates that poorest student or their parents do not have the money to buy internet packs.

There are other issues exist for digital divide in educational environment like, health condition, Lack of electricity and lack of willingness to adopt new technological advances, etc.

3.0 Suggestion and Conclusion:

COVID-19 Pandemic affects educational institute and strengthen the digital divide. 'Dream a Dream, an organization working towards empowering young people from vulnerable backgrounds' in their report suggests some possible solutions to overcome this situation:

- Mental well-being: The educational ecosystem needs to work on the mental health of students and teachers' well-being.
- Financial assistance: Financial assistance is required for building the financial capabilities of the educational institutions.
- Accessible solutions for continued learning: Appropriate teaching aids, digital solutions, and training of teaching staff for remote, virtual, or blended learning should be provided.

So, finally it can be said that, if both State and Central government takes some initiatives like

- Implementation of new education policy.
- Enhance consultation and communication mechanisms between students and teachers.
- Build a resilient education system and expanding the definition of the right to education and Empower people with the help of digital technologies.

Then it will possible to bridge the gap and overcome the digital divides in this Pandemic situation.

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