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COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND ITS IMPACT ON RURAL EDUCATION SYSTEM IN WEST BENGAL: A CASE STUDY OF DAKSHIN DINAJPUR DISTRICT

Chandan Adhikary¹✉

Abstract:

We are currently in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic and tapped by the corona virus. Under this grimming situation all the educational institutions are closed down to save the children from the deadly corona virus attack. This event has far reaching impact on our society and economy. We are never seen, witnessed and experienced this type of situation. Due to closer of schools all the educational activities have been stopped and the students are sinking into the midst of helpless and there is no way to get out from it. Educational activities are very much affected both in urban and rural areas due to COVID-19 pandemic. There are sharp differences have been seen in the means of getting facilities between urban and rural education system. There is huge communication gap in terms of getting governmental facilities on teaching-learning process between urban and rural areas. In this paper the researcher trCommittee hasies to highlight the impact of Covid-19 on rural school going children in West Bengal with special reference to Dakshin Dinajpur District due to long run closer of educational institutions where the percentage of rural areas is very high. What kind of problems the rural students faced is critically analyzed in this paper. What is their educational status and how much it affected due to corona pandemic lockdown situation will be critically discussed in this paper. Actually the author's main intention is to highlight how much rural education system of Dakshin Dinajpur district is affected due to Covid-19 pandemic and long run lockdown situation and closer of educational institutions.

Keywords: Activity, Class, Parents, Students, Learning, Closer of schools

The formal education system of India is rigorously affected by the unprecedented blow of COVID-19 or the Novel Corona virus threat. From its penetration into India, this horrific virus creates great fears among the people's mind at the outset. Scientists, virologists and doctors of different nations are engaged themselves to know about the nature and character of the deadly virus and work hard to invent a vaccine as early as possible for the sake of the human society. Till now (11th October, 2020) the corona virus affects more than sixty-nine lakh people and kills more than one lakh people in India and in West Bengal the numbers of people affected are 2,87,603 and 5,563 person are died. Since its inception, the Government of India for protective and preventive measures both announced nationwide lockdown to minimize the spread of corona virus disastrous. As a result all government organisations, all educational institutions including private sectors are closed down. The educational institutions are also closed down from March, 2020 to till September, 2020. The Government of India though decides to open the educational institution from 21st September,

1 [Author] ✉ [Corresponding Author] Research Scholar, Department of History, Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University, Vivekananda Street, Cooch Behar, 736101, West Bengal, INDIA. E-mail: chandanadhikary14@gmail.com

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2020 with some restrictions on a voluntary basis for students of 9th to 12th classes in this manner:



“All schools (with classes IX to XII) shall specifically ensure the following arrangements -

- i. Online/distance learning shall continue to be permitted and shall be encouraged.
- ii. Students of class 9th to 12th shall be permitted to visit their school on voluntary basis for taking guidance from their teachers. This will be subject to written consent of their parents/guardians. Such visits and teacher – student interaction must be organized in a staggered manner.”

[Source: SOP for partial reopening of Schools for students of 9th to 12th classes on a voluntary basis, for taking guidance from their teachers: in the context of COVID-19, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, Directorate General of Health Services, Government of India(EMR Division), 8th September, 2020]

But later on the Government has revised its decision on preventive ground to reduce the risk of COVID-19. West Bengal Government from time to time has also extended the date of closer of educational institutions and although keeps the educational institutions close till 30th September, 2020.

The order is as follows:

Whereas, in order to contain and combat spread of COVID 19, State Government vide order No. 285-CS/2020 dated 30/07/2020 had notified containment zones-based lockdown measures up to 31/08/2020.

2. Now, in consideration of the current COVID-19 situation, lockdown in the containment zones stands extended up to **30/09/2020**.

3. Following activities shall continue to remain closed / prohibited throughout the state up to **30/09/2020**:

- i. Schools, ICDS centers, colleges, educational/training/coaching institutions etc.

[Source: Official Order of the Government of West Bengal, Nabanna, Howrah, Memo No. 298- CS/2020, Dated: 31.08.2020, p. 1]

Further more the school closer date has been extended up to 15th November, 2020. Education Minister of the State, Hon’ble Sri Partha Chatterjee has announced that it is impossible to open the educational institutions at this critical situation when the positive case of COVID-19 is increasing day by day. He also states that an Expert Committee has been formed to look into the matter and the Committee will decide when the educational institutions be reopened. This is the present scenario of school education system in West Bengal and other states during COVID-19 pandemic scenario.

As we all know that education is the backbone of society and economy of every nation. A well educated society plays significant role for the nation building. But due to corona pandemic situation formal education in schools are very much affected in entire India. The West Bengal Board of Secondary Education to safeguard the school going students from the attack of Novel

Corona Virus by a notification suspends the classes of all educational institutions from 16th March, 2020 to combat the spread of Covid-19 virus. It was as follows:

In compliance with the order of the Principal secretary, School Education Department, Govt. of West Bengal, vide Memo no.:86-SSE/20 dated 14/03/2020, it is hereby notified that classes of all recognized secondary institutions (Govt., Govt. Sponsored & Non-Govt. aided) of the state will remain suspended from 16/03/2020 to 31/03/2020 to combat spread of Novel Corona Virus (COVID-19). The school authority are advised to comply with the order accordingly.

[Source: Notice: From the President, West Bengal Board of Secondary Education, Nivedita Bhawan, Kolkata, Memo No. 55/Press/2020, Dated: 14.03.2020]

It was taken so fast and thought that the corona pandemic issue would be sorted out within a few months. But the situation did not change yet. As the days ahead, the issue is getting very grim. So the school going children are compelled to learn and prepare their lessons at home. For this reason, the Education Department of West Bengal has taken up fruitful initiatives to teach the students from home. Model Activity Task is one of them. In this system students of various classes (from primary to higher secondary sections) can collect the model question papers through their guardians from schools and after solving the questions, their guardians will submit the answer scripts to the school authorities. Besides this, online classes are arranged by the Education Department where the experts teachers of various disciplines are teaching subject and chapter wise everyday in pre-determined time schedule. News channels like ABP Ananda, Zee 24 Ghanta, and News 18 Bangla etc. in collaboration with the School Education Department of West Bengal are arranging online live classes for the benefit of the school going children. The students can learn from these online classes through TV channels from their home. School teachers also take online classes from their home by using Google Meet, Zoom platforms etc. A new working method 'Work from Home' has been very popular in this critical situation. But sharp differences are visible between urban and rural school going children in West Bengal. And from this an acute problem is arisen in the formal school education system. Most of the rural schools of West Bengal are facing lots of infrastructural problems. There are no adequate school buildings, class rooms, teaching learning materials and teachers in the schools. Scarcity of fresh drinking water, want of deep tube wells, want of toilet facilities and improper sanitization in the school premise are most common problems. Students of economically poor section of the society though are able to get free text books, school bags and mid-day meals which tremendously minimise their dropouts; but due to closer of schools they are unable to take proper education from home. Most of the rural school students are first generation learners and do not get help from their parents in their studies. It is seen that from pre-primary section to class I or II they can get help from their guardians; but in upper classes it is impossible from them to teach them properly and unable to help in their learning. Anita Hembrom, a female student of Class-VII of Jasrai Sarifabad Jr. High School shares her experience,

"I belong to a very poor family. My father is a day labourer and his income is very low. Mother tries to earn by working in the field. My parents are illiterate. For this reason they are not able to help us in learning. School education is everything for us for learning. But due to closer of schools from last few months we learn nothing and but forget everything." (Respondent Statement-1, 12th August, 2020, Interviewed by author.)

In that case the parents are compelled to give their child private tuitions. The first generation learners are getting some educational knowledge from their private tutors beside school teachers.

This living process of village education is greatly damaged by Covid-19 pandemic situation. Due to complete lockdown students are unable to go neither to their schools nor to their private tutors. So in few months huge learning gaps are visible among the rural students. School entertainments are completely vanished from their life during this pandemic atmosphere.

Model activity tasks and online classes are no doubt very positive thinking of the West Bengal Government. There is no problem arise in model activity task. Students of various disciplines from time to time collect the question papers and submit their answer scripts to the school authorities. Schools teachers by evaluating their answer scripts easily judge their progress of learning at home. But in case of online classes we notice a different thing. Rural school students are far behind from their urban counterpart to get benefit from it. The success of online classes is depending on two things: firstly, smooth network connection and secondly, smart phones to access the network. Parents of urban areas school children are very much aware about the need of the hour and they are too much careful about their child's studies. These two indispensable things are available in urban areas. So in urban areas online classes are getting popular among the urban students. Now this is the main apparatus of learning. Online learning platforms like Google Meet, Zoom App, Whatsapp video calls, You Tube learning videos, learning videos uploaded by the School Education Department in the Banglar Shiksha Education Portal and so on help the students in their learning from home. But in rural areas unavailability of network connection is a common problem. Most important thing is that most of the parents have not a smart phone. If some parents or guardians have the smart phones but unable to operate it properly. As stated above that poor economic condition of the rural subjects create great hindrance in this respect. Most of the rural students are unable to get benefit from online virtual classes in West Bengal. According to the UNICEF's report we come to know that globally at least thirty-one per cent of students from pre-primary to upper-secondary schools can not be reached due to either a lack of policies supporting digital and broadcast remote learning or a lack of the household assets needed to receive digital or broadcast instruction. Esther Duflo, the famous Nobel laureate Economists has stated:

'in a developing country like India, the implementation of online classes is absolutely meaningless. The benefits of online study will reach a few private students. Consequently, education inequalities will increase.'(Source: Bharote online shikshay boisamya", Anandabazar Patrika, 10th October, 2020, p. 8)

So we can say that digital classes did not get popularity in rural areas. Author's personal experience and field survey in the study areas shows that neither the rural guardians nor the rural school going children have been given importance on online classes. Most of them have no clear idea about online virtual classes and how does it works.

Dakshin Dinajpur district remains an educationally backward region. It is predominantly an agriculture prone area. The literacy rate of the district at present is 73.8 per cent. There is no educational hub or university present here. Various initiatives although have been taken up by the State Government to modify the education scenario of this district. In higher education, new colleges are established and working policies are made to set up a full-fledged university at Balurghat. There is no scarcity of schools for children for their education at primary, upper primary and secondary level; but the problem is that lack of proper knowledge of the parents or guardians in education system makes the task complex in this COVID-19 pandemic situation. The parents do not think what to do for their children's education and how their children will learn in this corona lockdown situation. The rural subjects of South Dinajpur solely depend on government schools for their child's learning. They have not sound economic capacity to admit their children in private schools. Actually poor guardians are in great problem to earn money for their

subsistence in this pandemic situation. Mr. Suranjan Chaki, a resident of Shyampur Village, Dakshin Dinajpur tells,

“The lockdown brings darkness into our lives. The sudden lockdown makes them completely helpless. We never witnessed this type of situation in life. I am working in a private company as a day labourer in Kolkata. But due to lockdown I lost my job and compel to return back to my home and don't know what to do. The pandemic situation has totally ruined our live and livelihood.” (Respondent Statement-2, 20th August, 2020, Interviewed by author).

The members of the household make a living by doing small chores. The rural subjects run their families on daily wages besides as agricultural labourers. Many go to abroad as labourers in other states as they do not get the right job for their livelihood. In this lockdown situation earning is now becoming burning to them. Making a living is now very difficult for them. Consequently, their children have been facing lots of problem in their studies due to shortage of money and improper income. The rural under graduate students are also compelled to do daily job to help their parents as well as their families. Field survey shows that they are aware about the government's initiatives for their learning such as model activity task and online classes. Model activity task though makes some success; but big problem creates to conduct online classes smoothly. The chief problems are: 1) the minor children of the rural areas do not have any idea about the online classes. Their parents are also ignored about the matter; 2) most of them do not have smart phone which is the primary requirement for facilitating online classes. If someone have smart phones but do not know how to operate it; and 3) network problem is a common thing. In the twenty-first century when we are going to enter into ultra modern age but the government fails to give network access to the remotest village areas. So in this condition we can not say that the online classes will success due to unavailability of network access. Tapas Roy, Assistant Teacher of Jasrai Sarifabad Junior High School, shares his experience to the author in this long run lockdown. He tells,

“most of students are unconscious about the online classes. Most of them have no smart phones and WhatsApp number. The students of his schools are belonging to unprivileged village communities and entirely depend on government schools for their studies. Since lockdown the teachers of the school are unable to meet them face to face. So learning feedback and interaction between them is now impossible. To sort out his problem, he calls the students regularly by phone to know their problem in learning and help them as much as possible.” (Respondent Statement-3, 10th September, 2020, Interviewed by author).

Saheli Chaki, an Assistant Teacher of Promod Dasgupta Smrity Vidyapith, also admits these points and adding that rural students are deadly victimised due to COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. The students of her school area have no other alternatives to learn their lessons except school education. She tells the author an important weakness of the online classes. Her personal experience is,

“online classes on literature, arts and humanities although have not make major problems; but in case of science classes the students are facing big troubles. Most of the students neither understand nor give full concentration on the subject matter of the science and mathematical problems. Irregularity of the students to attend online classes makes the problem a gigantic task.” (Respondent Statement-4, 15th September, 2020, Interviewed by author)

Mallika Mandal, a para-teacher of Nayabazar High School tells that time schedule of online classes or virtual learning creates very much problem. Her personal experience is as follows:

“Most of the teachers of our school are unable to join all the students at a time for the online classes. Very negligible portion of students are attending online classes and the ratio is very low if compared to school attendance.” (Respondent Statement-5, 25th September, 2020, Interviewed by author)

It is noticed that four to six per cent, and some times below the percentage of students are attending online classes in the rural areas. So the success rate of online classes is very poor. It neither fulfils the appetite of knowledge of the students nor mitigates the success rate of the schooling class system. Some famous educationists, intellectuals opine that 'online classes can never be an alternative to the school education system.' Dr. Kartik Chandra Sutradhar, Associate Professor of Department of History, Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University opines his personal experience to the author:

"There are some big problems to operate online classes due to unconsciousness of the rural students. Most of the rural students have no smart phones and want of proper knowledge to join virtual classes make a big hindrance to them. The students have lost their interest in learning in this griming situation. Passing of students without board or annual exam in schools make a big learning gap in their educational life, the gap, I, think, never be fulfilled. COVID-19 pandemic has mutilated the education system of rural Bengal. (Respondent Statement-6, 20th August, 2020, Interviewed by author)

An article published in the Hindustan Times notes that 'virtual learning is okay, but no replacement for classroom lessons.' [Source: Hindustan Times, 20th April, 2020]. So the importance of classroom classes can never be underestimated. So we can say that the COVID-19 outbreak has disrupted not only the academic year of all educational institutions across the country but also the learning capacity of the rural students due to unprecedented lockdown.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the closer of schools have devastating impact on formal education system particularly in the rural areas of Dakshin Dinajpur. This is although not a regional problem at all; the COVID-19 pandemic situation affects the teaching-learning scenario of entire India. It teaches us to think in a different way to conduct teaching-learning process and facilitating the learners as much as possible. But this is a gigantic task and cannot solve in easy way. Actually the learners and parents in their life did not face this type of situation in learning and livelihood. It is completely a new experience to them. Lockdown brings us a new lifestyle that we do not habituate before. School going children spent their whole time in their house which brings mental pressure on them. If we go through the school education system of West Bengal we found four categories of learners are prevailing in schools. These are: pre-primary section or Anganwari schools, primary section (from Class I – V), upper primary section (from Class VI – VIII) and secondary section (from Class IX- XII). School education from pre-primary to primary sections is mainly supervised through the mode of learning with playing process. It is chiefly activity based learning which attracts the students to come to school and learn according to their needs. Students are very much enjoying the learning procedures. This system of learning is very popular among the minor learners of primary sections which are completely stopped due to pandemic situation. Nandan Adhikary, a teacher of Ganjakuri F.P. School, in Tapan block of Dakshin Dinajpur, states,

"The learners of primary section of his school area are totally depending on government schools for their education. They have not the facility in their house to learn in their own. Due to closer of schools they are spending their times by playing and doing some house works. I fear that the learners may be forgotten their acquired knowledge which they previously earn due to non-practicing in schools. (Respondent Statement-7, 20th September, 2020, Interviewed by author).

As we all know practice makes the man perfect. The author at the time of surveying some remote areas of Dakshin Dinajpur district has noticed that primary class students have already forgotten some of their previous educational knowledge and learning. In this pandemic situation and closer of schools, it is impossible to the teachers to go to their house and help them to teach their lessons. Students are also unable to meet their teachers and do not share their educational problems. In

this way lockdown has badly damaged the childhood of the minor students. Pradip Murmu, a school teacher of Madanpur Primary School, Dakshin Dinajpur apprehends,

“if the lockdown situation and closer of schools persist for a long time, chances of dropouts of the school going children might be happened which can not be accepted in any way. The primary schools are suffering due to lack of students, if the dropout increases then the schools will be ruined. So we are decided that all the teachers of our school work hard to overcome their problems by giving extra care to them when the school will reopen. It is our duty to help the school going children in every kind of situation. The lockdown has completely destroyed school education and teaches us how much we are helpless.” (Respondent Statement-8, 25th September, 2020, Interviewed by author)

This type of apprehension also arises in the upper primary and secondary sections. Although online classes are arranged by the education department to continue their learning and its shortcomings compel the Education Department to think an alternative as because of very poor response of the students in online classes. Great fear is seen among the board examinees of Class X and XII of West Bengal due to uncertainty of their board examinations. They do not know when the board exam will be taken and whether the syllabus will be reduced or not. School authorities though formed WhatsApp groups to circulate worksheets so that the students do not lag behind in preparing for their board exams. Till now no decisions have been taken up on the most important issue by the School Education Department. The closer of schools keep deep impact on their studies and they realize that school education is better than virtual learning. As a teacher of a remote school, the author can also realize their agony and hopelessness of the students. The long run closer of schools brings deep darkness to the back bencher students. They neither share their problems nor come forward to share their views to the teachers which bring big learning gap in their life. The girl and physically challenged students have been suffering a lot in this pandemic atmosphere.

To realise the problem of the students and suggestions from guardians and the Expert Committee, the Education Department of West Bengal has decided to start teacher on call programme to facilitate the students in their learning process. It is a very significant initiative of the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education. The name of the programme is ‘Banglar Shiksha-Durobhashe.’ The initiative is as follows:

“Since the Schools are closed due to COVID-19 pandemic, the School Education Department, in collaboration with the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education has undertaken a number of initiatives so that students can pursue their studies, while staying home. As a part of this endeavour, Banglar Shiksha Durobhashe is a component. The students while undergoing their studies or performing the activity tasks can clear their doubt through a Toll-Free telephone number.

In order to accomplish the said initiative the teachers who have participated in orientation programme conducted by Expert Committee, have been shortlisted. The teachers listed in Set-I of the annexure to this letter will take phone calls on Monday, Wednesday and Friday while the teachers listed in Set-II will take phone calls from the students on Tuesday, Thursday and Friday. Kindly communicate the list to the respective teachers and Head of the Institutions requesting the concerned teachers to make them available over phone on the respective days from 11am to 1 pm and 2 pm to 4 pm. (Source: Order of the Secretary-in-Charge, West Bengal Board of Secondary Education to The District Inspector of Schools (Secondary) on “Teacher enlisted for “Banglar Shiksha-Durobhashe”, Memo No: N/S/1688, Dated: 30.07.2020)

Under this programme as stated above the shortlisted teachers who are participated in orientation programme conducted by the Expert Committee will take phone calls on the respective days from 11 am to 1 pm and from 2 pm to 4 pm to answer the queries of the students and help the students to express their views freely. This is no doubt an important step but many of the students are

unaware of the initiative. The students who know about the initiative are hesitating to do phone calls to the unknown teachers. In this matter the urban students are far ahead from their rural counterpart. In this pandemic situation and closer of schools some teachers share their practical experience to the author that the rural students are very much enjoying the leave as holidays. There is no pressure on them about their studies and much discussed 'no detention policy' or free from passing of school exams make the students indifference about their studies. Free from detention they take learning is not an important thing for their future, basically in rural areas. Actually the rural students in normal situation are engaged in various works to help their family members for earning money. This learning gap will never be fulfilled and they will face problem in their future life. It not only destroys their present but also their future studies. Actually the school going children are very much confused in this pandemic situation. They are missing the guidance and inspirations from the teachers which are very much important for their future building. The special children of the rural areas are completely helpless because of no body take care their education. The task of socialisation of the students through schooling system is completely broken down due to closer of schools in this long run pandemic lockdown situation. It has been created far reaching impact on our society. The New National Education Policy, 2020 or NEP, 2020 as we all know that it will be implemented in the next academic session and hope that it will mitigate the aspiration of the rural society. The new National Education Policy, 2020 clearly mentions,

"The new education policy must provide to all students, irrespective of their place of residence, a quality education system, with particular focus on historically marginalised, disadvantaged, and underrepresented groups." (Source: National Education Policy 2020, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, p. 4 (accessed from www.mhrd.gov.in))

The COVID-19 pandemic and its consequence lockdown teach us a lot. The formal education system of India that has been facing a great blow and hope we will conscious ourselves to overcome our educational shortfalls and do better to tackle such kind of situation if occur in near future. This is the time to work hand in hand for the sake of our society, for our economy and also for our education system for our future generation. We could not allow the education system, the main pillar of our society, to be destroyed in this COVID-19 pandemic situation any way. We pledge that we should defeat and destroy the deadly virus, and save our education.

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