



Research Paper

COVID-19 Pandemic: the Scenario of Children's Elementary Education and Well-being in Rural India

Dr. Barnali Maity

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology,
Ramnagar College
of Vidyasagar University, Midnapore (East) – 721453.
West Bengal, India

ABSTRACT: The COVID-19 pandemic has led to the prolonged closure of schools combined with the shock to the economy and the health of the population, has had an unprecedented effect on children's elementary education and wellbeing. The impact is not equal, even among children; the access to education, health care facilities and nutritional meals is limited when it comes to the poor and vulnerable children. It has both short- and long-term repercussions that put the development of an entire generation at risk. Now children are expected to be supervising their learning and other well-beings only in the homes, potentially under the guidance of parents or other family members. The present study was designed to understand and find out parents' point of view, perspective and objective on their children's education and well-being in rural scenario. Here, for the study the children of class I to IV were chosen and they all were admitting at government primary schools in their own villages. A field survey was conducted to meet 200 parents on the basis of purposive sampling technique. A structured close and open ended questionnaire was designed as a tool to collect data. Primary data were collected around 10 days from 1st July to 10th July, 2021. The study reported the lacuna seen in elementary education, nutrition and other well being among school going children. Strong strategies are urgently needed.

KEY WORDS: COVID-19 Pandemic, children, elementary education, well-being, parental perception

Received 01 November, 2021; Revised: 12 November, 2021; Accepted 14 November, 2021 © The author(s) 2021. Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

I. INTRODUCTION

The novel corona virus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has had a widespread brunt on the elementary education due to the prolonged school closures as public health measures taken by governments. School closures mean students lose opportunities to learn vital cognitive, social, physical, and emotional skills which have both short and long-term repercussions that put the development of an entire human at danger. Primary schools have been closed in India for over 18 months, that is, more than 500 days. As the COVID- 19 infected cases began to increase in the second week of March 2020, schools were the first to close down [1]. Indeed, the duration of school closures in India has been among the longest in the world, according to the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [2]. There is the urgent need to promote and safeguard every child's right to education as set out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE). Children are society's most precious resource and they should have the right to contain education and well being in their development and growth enhanced and protected in a safe and nurturing environment.

There is another question is about providing food to the school students. In the pandemic context, India has made their own systems as take home rations of providing food to school students. India's school lunch programme, also popularly known as Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS) is the largest school feeding programme in world, has proved to be quite effective in improving the child health and nutrition by alleviating classroom hunger and fulfilling the daily dietary requirements of children. Schools play an important role in the direct provision of health and nutrition services in the first 8,000 days of a child's life that are critical for their development [3] and [4]. School meal has been found to be effective in a number of contexts, including emergency situations. Students and families relying only on school meal for their children are further being

pushed to hunger and poverty. So, the educational and nutritional disruption caused by prolonged school closures will have long-term consequences if not handled appropriately.

During school closure, parents face the challenge of supervising their children's learning and well being in addition to other responsibilities, such as housework and economic earning. A child's education can be directly influenced by their parent's understanding of their educational attainment. Parental perceptions of children's learning can influence parental involvement in education. This seems to be a relevant topic today under the current pandemic crisis, as millions of children in rural India are expected to be learning in their homes, potentially under the guidance of parents or other family members.

In the current COVID-19 pandemic situation, it is the need to think carefully about differential support which can be provided at home for parents, especially from low income families regarding their child's education and well being. Because, the impact was more severe for disadvantaged children and their families, causing interrupted learning, compromised nutrition, childcare problems, and consequent economic cost to families who have lost their work. This study demonstrates the willingness of parents to support their children's learning and well being, the question is how best to support these parents so that they can turn such willingness into action.

II. COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Initially, in the month of December 2019, a human respiratory disease appeared in Wuhan Hubei Province, People's Republic of China, caused by a novel member of the coronaviruses. On 31st December 2019, China informed the World Health Organization (WHO) about the number of patients with symptoms of respiratory illness of unknown cause [5]. On 30th January 2020, the WHO declared the outbreak of this new coronavirus disease, COVID-19, to be a Public Health Emergency of International Concern [6]. On 11th February, 2020, WHO announced a name for the new coronavirus disease: COVID-19 [7]. On the 11th of March, 2020, WHO declared COVID-19 as a global health threat, a pandemic as by then it covers 114 countries in 3 months and infects more than 118,000 people in the world [8].

In India, the first confirmed positive case was reported on 30th January in a student from Thrissur district of Kerala who had returned home for a vacation from Wuhan University in China [9].

III. COVID-19 PANDEMIC, CHILDREN'S ELEMENTARY EDUCATION AND WELL-BEING

"The sheer number of children whose education was completely disrupted for months on end is a global education emergency. The repercussions could be felt in economies and societies for decades to come. For at least 463 million children whose schools closed due to COVID-19, there was no such a thing as remote learning," said Henrietta Fore, UNICEF Executive Director. At least a third of the world's schoolchildren – 463 million children globally – were unable to access remote learning when COVID-19 shuttered their schools, according to a new UNICEF report released today as countries across the world grapple with their 'back-to-school' plans [10]. Other than this, a study by UNICEF [11] shows that prolonged closures disrupt essential school-based services such as immunization, school feeding, mental health, and psychosocial support, and can cause stress and anxiety due to the loss of peer interaction and disrupted routines. To summarize, without immediate intervention, the triple combination of school closures, economic recession and absence of effective school meal have negative effects on children's and adolescents' physical, cognitive and emotional development. These negative effects on learning, nutrition and emotional health may have medium and long-term consequences, which could jeopardize a generation's full development [12]. The impact of COVID-19 pandemic was more severe for disadvantaged children and their families, causing interrupted learning, compromised nutrition, childcare problems, and consequent economic cost to families who could not work [13], especially in rural India. Eighty-five percent of schools in India are located in rural areas. This percentage share has been constant between 2013-2018. Seventy-one percent of enrolment in the country is concentrated in rural locations [14].

A recent circular generated on July 31st 2020, the food security allowances to children as take home rations comprising food grains, pulses, and oil etc. are allowed for both primary and upper primary students. The food content consists for primary students 100 Pulses (20 gms), vegetable (50 gms), oil (5 gms), etc. and for upper primary students, 150 Pulses (30 gms), vegetable (75 gms), oil (7.5 gms), etc. [15]. But the evidence supporting the effectiveness of school meals in improving nutrition outcomes is stronger and more complete than that for take-home rations [16] and [17]. The Mid-day Meal (MDM) program in India is the largest school feeding program in the world [18], catering to about 144 million children, with approximately 80% coverage across primary school students [19]. The school is also a vehicle for socialisation and this means physical mingling. The mid-day meal scheme is not only meant as nutrition or as an incentive to attend school, but it also helps children mingle and socialize [20].

IV. OBJECTIVES

1. To understand the impact of COVID-19 on children's well-being and their education.
2. To identify the parental perceptions and their subsequent involvement in their children's education and well being.
3. To anticipate the challenges faced by the parents on children's education and well being.

V. METHODOLOGY ADOPTED FOR THE STUDY

This study is situated in Sutahata block of East Midnapore district of rural West Bengal, India. One time observational and experimental study was taken on 200 parents by using purposive sampling technique under non-probability sampling method. The number of male and female students' parents was equal in the sample. Here the students of class I to IV were chosen and they all were admitting at government primary school in their own villages. A structured close and open ended questionnaire was designed as a tool to collect data. Primary data were collected around 10 days from 1st July to 10th July, 2021.

Secondary sources of data used are (a) national and international reports, (b) govt. reports, (c) search engines (Google search), (d) academic journals, (e) survey reports, and (f) news papers. Descriptive statistics were carried out to interpret the responses of study participants. Simple percentage distribution was estimated to assess education and well being status of the children.

VI. FINDINGS

The majority of respondents were affiliated to the Hindu religion (63%), and remaining were Muslims. 75.4% had a family income of less than INR 10,000 per month. 69% respondents were associated with own agriculture and farming. Remaining were not any land and property except own house building. At 38% house, main earning member live at distance place as migratory labour. At 50.8% house, male and female were both working. Female member were associated with the work as maid servant, patient caring as nursing home, petty shop-keeper etc. In addition, 80.4% women were involving at 100 days work in their own villages.

In this study major reporter was the mothers of the school children. Therefore, 83% mother was interviewed about their perceptions, attitudes and actions towards the child's schooling and learning. Parents were first asked as they felt that they are the only supporter at home for children's learning. Among them only 68% mother were capable to read and write. Overwhelmingly, 89% of the parents felt that they should support their child's studies at home. Only 31% parents have the time and capability in sitting with their children's learning at home. Most parents (91%) were worried about their children's learning gaps due to prolonged school closure. Around 89% parents reported that their child's learning has been hampered due to prolonged physical absence of the school teacher. Also 76% respondents reported that they depend on tuition teachers and rest are dependent on the child's siblings in the home for their child's learning. Therefore, parents in rural communities are keen to support their children's learning. But 67% parents reported that they were losing their employment in the COVID-19 pandemic era. Around 53% parents were unable to pay the tuition teachers on regular basis. Now these children are not regular in their learning and education due to the absence of proper guidance and supervision. 87% parents reported that their child had not received any contact from school teachers regarding learning since their school closed. 75% parents reported that children tend to spend less time in learning compared to when schools are open. 45% parents were getting annoyed of children's continuous watching cartoons in the television.

88% of respondents reported that the child's mental well-being and happiness were affected during the pandemic due to the lack of Children's extracurricular opportunities (84%), friendship and social lives (72%), and playtime and recreational opportunities (59%). Around 86% parents kept objection on child's aggressive behaviour due to absence of peers in the school and playground. In another side, 93% parents reported that they were becoming annoyed of whole time presence of their children in the home for greater care giving burden, maintaining 'stay at home' advice for the fear of getting infected the COVID-19 virus. It was observed that 60% respondents spend time with the child over household chores; 36% respondents spend time with the child watching movies; only 18% of parents have occasionally told or read a story to their children. 40% respondents reported that they were not able to spend much time with the child during the lockdown due to added works. 42% Parents said that there had been physical or emotional violence in their home since the start of the pandemic. For girl children 59% mothers reported that they keep engaged them at domestic work. For boy children, 69% parents reported that they keep engaged them at farming and agricultural activity.

78% of parents reported that the pandemic significantly impacted the eating patterns of their children during the school closed. 70% respondent felt that their child's health was affected due to inadequate nutrition during the pandemic. Regarding school meal, parents reported that 'take home rations' are not regular provided for their children. 71.8% parents told that the rations are insufficient for their children. In addition, 76.8% respondents worried about absence of regular check up and provided medicine by the schools for boosting the immunity for children due to school closure. 72% reported that the school lunch is good alternative for their

children instead of home lunch. 79% parents felt that through school lunch, children were disciplined and learning good habit during eating time.

VII. DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates the willingness of parents to support their children's learning, especially the mothers. For the primary section at government schools, online classes are not running. School education curriculum was totally shut down. During school time the concerned school master/mistress motivate the child's learning. Their physical presence initiates the children to complete their scheduled class work. Since the pandemic start, there is not any such motivation and provided home work by the school.

Students from poor families with lower educational levels and children with poor learning motivation suffer most during COVID-19 pandemic. The study found that more affluent and educated parents were more likely to become involved in their children's learning, as they themselves tend to be more educated and to recognise their child's learning gaps observing their children's incapacity to read a simple text book or calculate simple mathematics, whereas less affluent and less educated parents had faced more challenges supporting their child's learning. Relatively richer parents, in rural areas of West Bengal, tend to have children who outperform their peers in basic academic skills. In line with this, richer parents were likely to correctly predict that whether their children were learning, probably because they are themselves as educated. These parents then tend to become more involved with their children's learning, generating a positive cycle of learning support for children. But poorer families did not have the knowledge to recognise whether their children are learning or the resources to support them.

Now students are currently being automatically promoted to the next class in the absence of exams, which accounts for the fact that their learning levels have actually regressed, as parents reported. Children are being promoted to higher classes without adequate preparedness. Now the question for the parents whether their children are really learning. Parents reported that their child's reading and writing capabilities have gone down during the lockdown. While several classes were promoted to the next class without exams, is likely to enhance drop-out rates in the near future.

Children tend to spend less time in learning compared to when schools are open due to absence of scheduled home work provided by the school teacher. Children were not getting feared of concerned tuition teacher. Watching cartoons in the television were the best time pass for children. Parents reported as they were worried of continuous watching of small screen as stressors for eye of their children. For the child, the routine had gone haywire, the playtime was zero and there was not any separation between home time and school time. As schools were shut, every house is a school and every parent is a teacher. The playtime and reading time gets merged with school time and there is no boundary between bed room and reading room for the children in the rural scenario.

Most of the parents reported that their child became more agitated and anxious during the school closure. Schools are hub of social activity and peer interaction. Absence of class interaction and inefficient time table significantly affected the satisfaction levels among children. The peer-to-peer impact in the school environment motivates education and learning social skills, which is not be possible during pandemic. The school closure with mobility restrictions put a full-stop to physical activity and social interaction that was the fulcrum of their life.

Children from low-income families and rural areas were at a higher risk of child abuse, and forced labour. Mostly boy children work in the family's agricultural farming; girls fetch water, clean, cook and look after younger siblings. Financial strain, isolation, and substance use were risk factors for family violence that have worsened during the pandemic. A combination of school closures, mobility restrictions, 'stay at home' suggestions and economic consequences have resulted violence at home, where children were getting unsecured and feared.

Schools play a vital role not only in ensuring the continuity in education by providing educational material but also by providing services of counsellors, mentors, sessions on personal hygiene, and healthy lifestyle. Children spend a large part of their day time at school; this is an ideal setting for building of good habit in their day to day life style behaviour. Home is the place where the child first learns the habits and then the school is to build the good habit. Healthy eating is healthy living. In the school lunch, children are taught about healthy eating and active living. The MDMS helps in developing good food habits as instructed by teachers among children. Children learn good habits such as: washing hands properly before and after meals, chew their food properly and silently, do not waste food, do not talk keeping food into the mouth, do not scatter food while eating, clean the sitting place, eat in rows and discipline, cleaning utensils and keeping them on proper place. Children are disciplined to take lunch in particular time on regular basis. Also their sitting arrangements promote to make the good habit of cooperation among themselves. In the pandemic era, this contributory role of school curriculum and school meal was absolutely missing for the children.

Regular absence of health checking in the school affects their proper immunization. Parents from rural setting and low economic earnings were less aware of health checking of their children. They commented as where survival in this pandemic era is a big question, and then there is not any notion of child's immunization. Disruption in life-saving immunization activities can contribute to increasing risk of chronic disease later in life.

It was being reported that take-home rations are falling short in tackling the health and nutrition challenges of children in low income families because they have to share the meals with their siblings and parents. Gross value of school lunch is being sent to parents, it is also impossible to ensure that the cash or food is being used solely for the child.

As per instructions, a student is allotted Rs. 7 to Rs. 8 per day for cooked food served at schools. Within this, a student can get rice, daal, egg (twice a week) or soya bean, and chana. Such a meal for one student would be impossible to arrange. Schools manage as they buy in bulk and hence they came cheap. However, the pace of distribution of dry ration, food items and meals to the children is not up to the mark. There is no doubt that there are a huge number of vulnerable students who solely rely on such meals for their dietary requirements. Catering to the nutritional needs of these students on the move is a challenge which cannot be ignored.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has been devastating the elementary education and well being of rural children. It affects the all-round development of children, their learning, health, nutrition and psychological wellbeing. It has also augmented the socio-economic burden on vulnerable parents. Rural India in particular is struggling with the fallout from the pandemic such as the migrant crisis and rampant unemployment. Therefore, the broadening of employment opportunities, capacity-building and new welfare schemes for parents must be accompanied by the creation of an equitable and sustainable education system. The unprecedented economic hardship brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic has had a domino effect on children's education and well being. Rural India needs elementary educational reform now more than ever. In addition food insecurity can have dire consequences for those children. If the government fails to take action now, India will become an even more unequal and divided nation than it is today. Need of the hour is to develop an immediate and effective measures that help educational institutions to strengthen student's elementary education and well being. Foundational skills have been consistently shown to exert significant influence on the generation of human capital, and therefore it is crucial to prioritise education and well being for early graders.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Times Of India-Online, "Govt announces closure of all educational establishments across India till March 31," The Times of India, March 16, 2020.
- [2]. UNESCO. "Education: From disruption to recovery," Paris: UNESCO, 2020.
- [3]. Mason-Jones, A. J. *et al.* 'A systematic review of the role of school-based healthcare in adolescent sexual, reproductive, and mental health', *Systematic Reviews*, 2012, 1(1), p. 49. doi: 10.1186/2046-4053-1-49
- [4]. Xu, T. *et al.* 'School-based interventions to promote adolescent health: A systematic review in low- and middle-income countries of WHO Western Pacific Region', *PLOS ONE*. Edited by R. A. Annunziato, 2020, 15(3), p. e0230046. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0230046.
- [5]. WHO (2020). Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak, Europe:WHO.
- [6]. WHO (2020). Statement on the second meeting of the International Health Regulations (2005) Emergency Committee regarding the outbreak of novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV), January 30, Geneva, WHO.
- [7]. WHO (2020). Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Situation Report – 46, March 6, WHO.
- [8]. WHO (2020). WHO Director-General's Opening Remarks at the Media Briefing on COVID-19, March 11, WHO.
- [9]. Rawat, Mukesh (2020). Coronavirus in India: Tracking Country's First 50 COVID-19 Cases; what Numbers Tell, India Today, March, 12.
- [10]. UNICEF. COVID-19: At least a third of the world's schoolchildren unable to access remote learning during school closures, new report says, UNICEF, New York, August 27, 2020.
- [11]. UNICEF. "Guidance on Distance Learning Modalities to Reach All Children and Youth During School Closures Focusing on low- and no-tech modalities to reach the most marginalized", UNICEF, New York, 2020.
- [12]. Clark, H., and others. 'A future for the world's children? A WHO-UNICEF-Lancet Commission'. *The Lancet*, vol. 395, No. 10224, 605–658, February, 2020.
- [13]. Verma, A.K. and Prakash, S. Impact of Covid-19 on Environment and Society. *Journal of Global Biosciences*, 2020, 9(5): 7352-7363.
- [14]. Menon, Sharanya, Education in India needs an overhaul, *India Development Review*, November 18, 2020.
- [15]. MDM circular. Ministry of Human Resource Development, Department of school education & literacy. 31-07-2020. Circular. F. No. 1-2/2020 Desk (MDM).
Link:http://mdm.nic.in/mdm_website/Files/OrderCirculars/2020/JS_DOLetters/DO_Letter_Food%20Security%20Allowance-31-7-2020.pdf
- [16]. Afridi, F. 'Child welfare programs and child nutrition: Evidence from a mandated school meal program in India', *Journal of Development Economics*, Elsevier B.V., 2010, 92(2), pp. 152–165, doi: 10.1016/j.jdeveco.2009.02.002
- [17]. Drake, L. *et al.* 'School Feeding Programs in Middle Childhood and Adolescence', in Bundy, D. A. P. *et al.* (eds) *Re-Imagining School Feeding: A High-Return Investment in Human Capital and Local Economy*, Washington, DC: World Bank, 2018.
- [18]. World Food Programme, *State of School Feeding Worldwide*, 2013, May, 22, <https://www.wfp.org/publications/state-school-feeding-worldwide-2013>.
- [19]. Chowdhury, S. R. The correlation between midday meals and learning outcomes, *India Development Review*, March 19, 2019.

- [20]. Ranade, Ajit, Long-term Covid effect: Keeping schools closed is an easy option with harmful long-term consequences, The FREE PRESS Journal, September 13, 2021.