COVID-19: Examining the Impact of Lockdown in India after One Year

EPW ENGAGE

One year after its announcement in March 2020, the consequences of India’s strict COVID-19 lockdown measures and ineffective policy responses continue to be felt, be it in terms of livelihood loss and economic downturn or increased marginalisation of vulnerable sections of society.

On 24 March 2020, with approximately 500 confirmed positive cases of COVID-19 reported in India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed the country and declared a nationwide lockdown. He announced that “a total ban is being imposed on people, from stepping out of their homes for a period of 21 days.” The lockdown, which would be in operation from the midnight of 24–25 March, was announced with only four hours’ notice.

On the same day, the Union Ministry of Home Affairs notified stringent lockdown measures, including the suspension of transport services and closing of government offices, commercial and industrial establishments. Exceptions were made for activities such as police and emergency services, essential services such as electricity, water and sanitation, postal services, banking and insurance services, manufacture of essential commodities, sale and transport of essential goods like food, telecommunications and internet services, and print and electronic media. Hospitality services were suspended, excepting those accommodating persons stranded due to lockdown, and those earmarked for quarantine facilities. All educational institutions were to be shut down. All social, political, sports, entertainment, academic, cultural, religious functions and gatherings were barred, and places of worship were to be closed to the public.
Under the Ministry of Home Affairs order, any person violating the containment measures would be liable to be proceeded against as per the provisions of Sections 51–60 of the Disaster Management Act, 2005, with scope for imprisonment of up to two years and/or a fine.

The initial months of the lockdown witnessed an effective halting of all travel and economic activities—other than those deemed “essential services.” Partha Chatterjee, Soma Dey and Shweta Jain (2020) observed:

Beginning from 24 March, the country saw one of the severest lockdowns in the world being imposed on 1.3 billion people.

What followed were more “phases” of lockdown until 31 May 2020 and thereafter, a phased “unlock,” where states were allowed to gradually ease rules for “social distancing” based on their assessment of the local COVID-19 situation, in accordance with overarching central guidelines.

Despite easing of restrictions, travel and economic activity continued to remain muted in the months that followed. An EPW editorial (31 October 2020) explained:

The impact of the complete lockdown and travel restrictions, one of the strictest in the world, was devastating both for human beings as well as the economy. Electricity consumption went down to 30% below normal by end March and has remained below normal till August, indicating the severity of the lockdown. The decline in both mobility and light intensity in India was the highest in districts with the most COVID-19 infections per capita. And, while mobility declined between 20% and 30% in a third of the districts, it fell between 30% and 35% in another half of the districts, and even more than that in the remaining 15% of the districts.

While the COVID-19 pandemic unleashed unprecedented outcomes—affecting public health, livelihoods, the economy and our ways of living—the impact was exacerbated by the lockdown measures. From the hasty lockdown announcement, which was made only the evening before it was to come into force and left no alternative provisions in place for persons who would be stranded away from their homes with means of transport suspended, to the subsequent mismanagement of the lockdown with the proliferation of misinformation, poorly funded public health facilities and inadequate fiscal stimulus packages, the government’s ill-conceived policy responses have been at the heart of the challenges brought on by the pandemic. Abraham Samuel, Gorky Chakraborty and K J Joy (2020) attributed most of the consequences not to the pandemic itself, but to “the response of nations and governments,” or “the governmentality associated with the pandemic.”
A year after the announcement of the COVID-19 lockdown in India, we look back at some of its enduring consequences.

**Migrant Crisis**

The foremost visible impact of the sudden announcement of a nationwide lockdown was the migrant crisis that began to unfold in the early months of the lockdown. The restrictions on economic activity imposed by the lockdown meant that a majority of the migrant workers in cities, especially daily wage earners, were rendered jobless overnight.


The countrywide lockdown to contain the spread of COVID-19 pushed the labour migrants towards a pathetic situation marked by homelessness, hunger and unforeseen human miseries (SWAN 2020). A recent survey among migrant workers conducted in the middle of April 2020 revealed that 90% of them were not paid their wages in various states, 96% did not get rations from the government outlets, and 70% did not get cooked food during lockdown 1.0 (Hindu 2020).

In the absence of societal or government support, they sought to return to their homes in villages. An *EPW* editorial (4 April 2020) *observed*:

The proclamation of the national lockdown of 21 days, intended to break the chain of transmission of COVID-19 that had infected multitudes worldwide, however, led to an exodus of thousands of the working poor from Indian cities to villages. At the time of such an unexpected eventuality, what became obvious was that the socio-economic plight of the most vulnerable and poorest sections of the population was overlooked as no prior notice was given before the lockdown pronouncement.

Migrant workers hoping to return to their homes were left in the lurch with all means of transport having been stopped and no alternative arrangements put in place immediately. S Irudaya Rajan (2020) *wrote*:

The sudden announcement of the nationwide lockdown on 24 March 2020 led to widespread panic over their immediate, short- and long-term future of migrants at their states of destination. With no transportation to get back home, many of them took arduous long journeys to reach their native places. What we witnessed in its aftermath was a truly terrible sight of desperation
and misery as thousands of migrant workers took the roads towards their homes on foot in the absence of any other mode of transport. Their plight during this crisis has been due to ineffective and inadequate response on the part of the central and state governments, especially the states of origin, destination and their employers.

The crisis was exacerbated by the absence of a nationwide strategy to provide relief to stranded migrant workers, “wherein some states adopted pro-migrant measures and addressed the issues of the migrants in a humane way, while some states remained as mere spectators as the migrant crisis unfolded.”

Singh et al took stock:

The lockdown affected the livelihoods of nearly 4 crore internal migrants. Around 104 lakh of migrant labourers moved from urban areas to rural areas of origin in about 30 days from 1 May to 31 May 2020 using various modes of transportations, including Shramik trains bus, truck, autorickshaw and walking for thousands of kilometres (Economic Times 2020c). Many died in the process.

The government’s relief measures such as the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana were a case of too little too late, and were constrained by implementation issues. The welfare scheme involved direct benefit transfer (DBT) to construction worker beneficiaries. Ajit Jha (2020) explained:

Some basic issues of registration of workers, collection and distribution of cess have been unresolved for a long time. The active registration (that is, renewal of registration) of workers is a major issue, which has often been highlighted in the past by the advocacy forum, 44th Parliamentary Standing Committee on Labour, and by the Supreme Court of India. For example, in Maharashtra, there were about 0.56 million registered construction workers in 2016, of which only 50% of the total registrations were found to be valid. Similarly, in Delhi, the process of new registrations and the renewal of old ones is very slow.

... As per the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) of employment and unemployment, there were nearly 55 million construction workers in 2017–18. Based on the estimation, about 20 million workers would be left out of benefits sourced through the DBT mode. The registration rate is still not very high. The estimation shows that only 52.5% workers were registered in 2017, although there has been an increase of 6.2 million registered workers between 2017 and 2019. But, one could also expect an increase in the total number of workers in
this period. The rate of registration in Assam and Bihar is below 20%, whereas in states like Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, and Uttar Pradesh, it is below the national average.

Balwant Singh Mehta, Simi Mehta and Arjun Kumar (2021) also explained:

The measures by the finance minister can be summarised as too late and too little, where the existing schemes have been consolidated and portrayed as providing a major aid for the benefit of the poor. It is difficult to understand the calculation behind arriving at the figure of Rs 500 (~$7) in the Jan Dhan accounts to women and Rs 333 (<$5) to pensioners, and to what avail would this meagre sum be?

... Given the existing inflation and high costs of essential commodities, this scanty amount appears to be making a mockery of the poor by showcasing sheer tokenism.

They added that India’s COVID-19 relief package does not adequately provide for sections like small- and medium-sized enterprises, migrant labourers, the unorganised sector, pregnant and lactating women, children, those suffering from critical ailments, etc.

This is in continuation of habitual inclusion and exclusion errors in the official database, which was also highlighted in the Economic Survey of 2016-17 that noted an estimated exclusion error from 2011-12 suggested that two-fifths of the bottom 40% of the population are excluded from the PDS. The corresponding figure for 2011-12 for MGNREGA was 65%.

Impact on Livelihoods and Economic Slowdown

The COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdown restrictions caused unprecedented job losses. The quantity and quality of employment opportunities both deteriorated and are estimated to not have returned anywhere close to the pre-pandemic numbers yet.

Amit Basole (2021) wrote:

Many surveys investigating the COVID-19 impact on vulnerable workers, including ours, have shown that around 60%-80% of workers (self-employed, casual as well as salaried workers without job security) lost employment during the lockdown in April and May 2020. The CMIE data show that the lockdown affected around 43% of the national workforce. Even as late as December 2020, both CMIE data and our survey showed that 20% of those who lost work...
during the lockdown were unemployed (Abraham and Basole 2021; Nath et al 2021). Women and younger workers were much more likely to lose their jobs and less likely to recover (Abraham et al 2021). There was also an increase in informality during this period, with previously salaried workers returning to the labour market as self-employed or casual workers (Abraham and Basole 2021).

The livelihood losses had an expected impact on incomes as well. Basole added:

As a result, the CMIE data show a collapse in earnings during the first six months of the pandemic (March 2020 to August 2020), with an average household having 17% lower income in nominal terms relative to the same months in 2019. In absolute terms, this amounts to an entire month of lost earnings. The situation at the bottom of the income distribution is much worse with average household incomes being practically zero in the two lockdown months. Overall, the bottom 10% of households lost full three months of income in the six-month period from March to August (Lahoti et al 2021).

The impact on livelihoods is only one aspect of the economic impact of the lockdown. The lockdown restrictions further damaged an economy that was already slowing down prior to the pandemic. Rao (2021) observed:

The economy has shrunk by 15.7% in the first half of the year, and sectors with social distancing requirements continue to be under restrictions and some states are seeing an upsurge in new cases. The bank credit to commercial sector continues to be subdued and private investment continues to be low even after the phased relaxation of the restrictions.

Moreover, the economic downturn did not affect all sections of society equally. Chinoy and Jain (2021) wrote:

Households at the top of the pyramid are likely to have seen their incomes protected, and savings rates forced up during the lockdown, increasing “fuel in the tank” to drive future consumption. Meanwhile, households at the bottom are likely to have witnessed permanent hits to jobs and incomes, which will hurt their consumption. These cleavages are already visible.

... With the top 10% of India’s households responsible for 25%-30% of total consumption, near-term consumption is getting a boost as this pent-up demand expresses itself. To be sure, upper-income households have benefited from
higher savings for two quarters but this is a one-time effect. To the extent that households at the bottom have experienced a permanent loss of jobs and incomes, that could constitute a recurring drag on demand if the labour market does not heal faster. More generally, to the extent that COVID-19 has triggered an effective income transfer from the poor to the rich.

The government’s stimulus measures intended to aid economic recovery and growth have also fallen short. For instance, the Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan package announced in May 2020, touted to be worth ₹20 lakh crore, was actually a combination of fiscal and monetary measures as well as inadequate in scope. Calling it neither a relief nor a fiscal package, an EPW editorial (23 May 2020) remarked:

At this point, the specific role of the fiscal stimulus should be to increase public spending in physical or human capital, raise money in the hands of residents by direct cash transfers and subsidies, and provide safety nets like job guarantee and unemployment benefits. Despite being 10% of the gross domestic product, the Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan is far from being that kind of a fiscal package.

Similarly, C P Chandrasekhar (2020) underscored the futility of monetary policy interventions in addressing the economic slowdown.

Six months down the line, the evidence proves that this response is not working. It is now clear that the assumption that the recovery could be driven from the supply side with cheap credit and inducements to lend (in the form of selective partial or full guarantees) was wrong, rendering the dominant aspect of the stimulus weak and ineffective.

... In the midst of a crisis and with no prospect of an immediate recovery, many firms would either fall in the category of those ineligible for additional credit by virtue of being considered uncreditworthy or would be reticent to take on debt, given the uncertainty about their capacity to service that debt. In such circumstances, making credit the instrument to drive the recovery does not make sense, unless demand can be raised through autonomous spending of some kind. Such spending can only be undertaken by the government through its fiscal policy.

Even with the Union Budget 2021–22, the government has failed to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown. An EPW editorial (2021) explained:

If the denial of the steady slowdown in the economy has been the hallmark of
last year’s budget, this year’s budget has gone a step further by refusing to acknowledge the millions of informal and formal sector jobs lost to the pandemic and by ignoring the plight of the migrant workers, whose long march back home was the most visible face of the pandemic.

... In fact, the informal sector even fails to find a mention in the budget speech. And worse, even as the pandemic pushes millions back below the poverty line, the budget only makes haste in cutting down even the little subsidies and social security available. While the overall budget subsidies have been pared down by 43% to ₹3.7 lakh crore, the outlay of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee programme has been cut by 34.5% to ₹73,000 crore.

Public Health

While the lockdown has often been justified as placing “life” over “livelihoods,” and health over economic well-being, it is worth examining whether there was any improvement in public health outcomes owing to the lockdown restrictions.

According to an EPW editorial (31 October 2020), the World Bank’s report titled “Beaten or Broken? Informality and COVID-19” highlighted how India’s record on the COVID-19 front was lagging sharply behind seven other countries in South Asia on several counts, rebuffing the tall claims made by the government. The editorial added:

[D]espite the stringent lockdown, India’s success in controlling the pandemic has been unimpressive. By end September, the total number of COVID-19 infections in India was around 17 times more than in Bangladesh, the country with the second highest infections in South Asia. The number of infections in India, as measured by total COVID-19 cases per million people, was 4,574, while it was only 2,207 in Bangladesh, 2,670 in Nepal and 1,416 in Pakistan. Only Maldives beat India in this regard, with 19,038 COVID-19 cases per million. The death rate—the ratio of COVID-19 deaths to COVID-19 infections—was the highest in Afghanistan at 3.7%, followed by Pakistan with 2.1%, India with 1.6% and Bangladesh with 1.4%. Maldives, with the highest level of infections, had a death rate of only 0.3%.

Moreover, the official COVID-19 figures have also been disputed. M S Seshadri and T Jacob John (2020) used an alternative method of calculating the number infected with SARS-CoV-2 to posit:

The estimated numbers are far in excess of reported numbers and indicate the systemic flaws in reporting deaths in India, augmenting the extent of
underestimation.

An *EPW* editorial (13 June 2020) attributed the twin economic and health crises to the government’s actions:

There have been two successful models of fighting the pandemic. One, which South Korea attempted, is mass testing, tracing and isolating without a lockdown, and the other is what China, Vietnam, or, closer home, Kerala implemented, that is, a region-specific micro level lockdown with aggressive health measures to control the spread. India seems to have adopted the worst combination of a macro lockdown with micro testing that was bound to fail.

Similarly, Rohit Azad and C Saratchand (2020) called the national lockdown “ill-planned and callous” and attributed the spread of COVID-19 to inadequate testing:

[U]nlike many other infections, COVID-19 has a longer incubation period, because of which widespread testing is required to control transmission. However, the inability and unwillingness of many governments to undertake free, mass testing due to their commitment to the neo-liberal project has helped the infection spread further.

Amar Patnaik and Anshuman Sharma (2020) went a step further and contended that the lockdown itself was arguably counterproductive.

Early in the lockdown, India had relative control over curbing the potential spread of COVID-19, and may have prevented as many as five times more cases in April in a scenario without a lockdown (Dwivedi et al 2020).

Noting that the public health infrastructure is inadequate and had struggled to cater to the health needs of the citizens, even in times before the COVID-19 pandemic, Patnaik and Sharma added:

India’s public health system is in dire need of investment, and since we are witnessing that public health emergencies can bring down not just national but global economies, long lockdowns and emergency responses cannot be the only way to deal with them.

Daksha Parmar (2020) highlighted how the critical role to be played by public health
infrastructure in handling a pandemic like COVID-19 was being marred by the lack of government preparedness and investment.

Many people are of the opinion that public hospitals will not be able to manage the increased burden of the COVID-19 patients. It is true, given the huge shortage of beds, health personpower and ventilators, that the already fragile public health facilities will suffer.

She also wrote about the impact of the government’s policies on healthcare personnel:

Most of the health workers are working in extremely difficult situations without personal protective equipments, masks, sanitisers, etc, and are exposing themselves to increased risk of infection. It is because of the lack of preparedness by the government that our health workers are paying the biggest price and are also dying. Given the rapidly increasing positive cases amongst nurses and doctors, entire hospitals have been sealed in some cases. It is important to note that hierarchy within the health system increases the vulnerability of the front-line health workers and nurses, along with the cleaners and sanitation workers, who are exposed much more to the risk of infection (Nagral 2020).

Expanding Vulnerabilities

While the pandemic and the lockdown have had far-reaching effects on the economy and the society at large, some sections have been disproportionately affected. An EPW editorial (25 July 2020) noted:

The deleterious effects of the pandemic and the strict measures of lockdown have brought immense misery and risks for those who continue to be at the margins and fringes of the Indian society, even during non-COVID-19 times. These marginalised sections include the transgender community, the disabled, street children, sex workers, and others. The imposition of lockdown has not only aggravated precarity in their everyday survival but has also created more odds and obstacles in their efforts to earn their living and lead a “normal” life.

It added:

The disturbing aspect is that even the potential end of the lockdown will not really improve their access to livelihoods and health services. If anything, the
economic slowdown and the impact on services will render them even more vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination. Their access to government welfare programmes is also not an assured one.

Suparna Bhaskaran, Madhumita Dutta and Sirisha Naidu (2021) also wrote:

With India’s stricter national lockdown, it is the vulnerable population—Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims and women from these communities—who have borne the brunt of social, economic and health impacts of the virus as both essential but disposable workers.

Gita Chadha (2021) called this increased marginalisation of already vulnerable populations a “shadow pandemic.”

Like other social events and phenomena, the pandemic which is not neutral to gender is also not neutral to class, or caste, or sexuality or religion. It is more than clear now that people already marginalised and stigmatised, are the worst hit by the pandemic lockdowns. The hit is marked on several axes—psychological, economic, political, and cultural. Faced by the fact that each section gets affected differently, we realise that all of us are not “sailing in the same boat,” as the early narrative around the pandemic suggested. The boats, if you have one, are different in size, shape and comfort.

Analysing the impact of the lockdown on persons with disabilities (PWDs), Srei Chanda and T V Sekher (2020) noted:

During lockdown, the support system for PWDs is considerably affected, which demands an active response from the government and society at large. A majority of PWDs in India do not use any assistive devices and thus are dependent on others for performing their daily tasks. Availing transportation is a significant issue at this time as access to medicines and basic needs, like going to the market or ration shops, are a concern for the PWDs who are staying alone. According to NCPEDP (2020), 67% of PWDs did not get essential items delivered at their doorstep. Repairing or replacing assistive devices (prosthesis, orthosis, hearing aids, spectacles and wheelchairs) is difficult during lockdowns, which worsens the disability by restricting movement.

Additionally, the language of communication for PWDs varies. For instance, persons with visual impairment employ and understand Braille, PWDs in
hearing and speech understand lip readings or sign languages. Our conventional information-dissemination systems, like daily news reports and announcements from governmental organisations/departments on electronic or hard copies of news or information, usually do not use any mode of sign language. Covering of face with a mask or avoiding touching a surface due to a probable chance of infection adds another barrier in accessing information by PWDs.

Dalits and other marginalised communities also faced a disproportionate impact of lockdown measures. Vatya Raina and Ananya (2021) explained:

Two main characteristics of the COVID-19 crisis in India have been putting health and sanitation workers on the front line and pushing daily wage workers, migrant labourers and the low earning families to the fringes of survival. All manual scavengers in the country are Dalit, and even among different Dalit castes, such workers tend to be lower in the hierarchy, coming from some of the most marginalised and oppressed sub-castes. Most sanitation workers belong overwhelmingly to a single community: the Valmiki (Safi 2018). Similarly, the labourer community predominantly comprises the lower castes, as the data above suggests. This has led to lopsided and extremely inequitable effects of the lockdown on the people from lower castes because they have been on the receiving end of age-old caste stigma as well as the social, economic and political implications of caste. Medical aid, food security, a dignified existence, a right to the fruits of development they have been promised, means to basic survival have all been denied to this large population that has anyway been living on the brink of society.

Shiney Chakraborty (2020) highlighted the lockdown’s impact of women, in particular women’s employment:

The International Labour Organization (ILO 2020) report has indicated that as a result of COVID-19, an estimated 400 million informal sector workers are at risk of abject poverty in India. Women are likely to bear the brunt of job losses the most because much of their work is invisible, and they are more likely to work in informal work arrangements.1 Moreover, the significant and widening gender gaps in workforce participation rates, employment and wages that existed before the lockdown were expected to intensify during the post-lockdown period. Additionally, India has recorded one of the most unequal gender division of household work, and according to the first (and only) national Time Use Survey (TUS) (1998–99), women spend around 4.47 hours
per week on direct care work (that is, looking after children, elderly, sick and disabled), while men spent only 0.88 hours per week. Along with the gross imbalances in gender distribution of unpaid care work, the COVID-19 pandemic might worsen the situation by increasing women's burden of domestic chores, unduly cuts and lay-offs in employment.

Another dimension adding to the precarity of already marginalised sections, especially women and gender and sexual minorities, is the nature of the “home” that the lockdown pushed people to. With lockdown restrictions in place, many vulnerable persons were confined indoors in settings that left them more vulnerable, challenging the oft-touted myth of “stay home, stay safe.” Rukmini Sen (2020) explained:

That home is not a safe place has been established through years of research relating to domestic violence in India (EPW Engage 2020). For instance, for many married women, for people (mostly women) with disabilities, as well as for those exercising personal choices—like that of choosing one’s intimate sexual companion—words like “caged,” “trapped,” “confined,” and “control” have been synonymously used with the home. The National Crime Records Bureau 2018 data affirms that domestic violence tops crimes against women, with the “majority of the cases being registered under ‘cruelty by husband or his relatives’ at 31.9%.

... Despite all of these widely available facts, there was no separate thought given to what impact a pandemic-induced forced lockdown could have on violence inside the home.

Similarly, Madhuri Dixit and Dilip Chavan (2020) also wrote:

For both the housewives and the working women, the domestic sphere has continued to be the site of the production and reproduction of patriarchal ethos and experiences, and is marked by manifestations of power, dominance, -violence, unpaid labour, and the reproduction of patriarchy as channelised through practices of child-rearing, marriage, etc.

Anjali K K and Shubha Ranganthan (2020) highlighted the impact of the lockdown on the incidence of domestic violence.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the fore another crisis triggered by the lockdown—that of increasing cases of domestic violence against women locked in abusive homes and circumstances. Different parts of the world have
reported a spurt in the cases of domestic violence during the period of lockdown.

... Worse still, most women face difficulties in reporting violence, due to being trapped in the home with their abusers. It is highly likely, therefore, that the numbers are even higher than reported, and one will only know the real scenario after the lockdown.

Queer people face dual precarities in private spaces as well as public spaces, exacerbated by the pandemic and lockdowns. Samira Nadkarni and Swarnim (2021) explained:

> While the private domestic space is violent, it is merely a continuum of violence that also exists in public spaces. This will not substantially change during the lockdown since it pre-exists COVID-19 and is likely to continue until large-scale social changes occur.

However, under COVID-19, these issues are magnified. Given that trans people often struggle to find long-term employment, finances are always a concern since it affects access to all kinds of amenities. This additionally increases as places of employment seek to slash budgets and/or withdraw offers of employment. Members of the queer community who might otherwise have provided financial assistance are consequently unable to do so as well. Queer people, and particularly trans people, are unable to search for friendly housing as opportunities for interaction are limited in the pandemic, often requiring that one gamble in the hopes of acceptance. Notably, this can be as terrifying as landlords or locals may turn violent and abusive at any time, and, many of the queer community’s resources for emergency mobilisation have been impacted during the pandemic.

The ill-conceived norm of “social distancing” with its Brahmanical, patriarchal undertones, which gained prominence during the lockdown and was regularly advocated by the government, is another example of the enduring legacy of the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. Challenging the term, Smita Patil (2021) wrote:

> Category of social distancing needs to be revisited as a trope that reminds of the stigma and oppressive memory related to caste, trauma and gender stereotypes. Dalit women have been undergoing various forms of social distancing based on their triple oppression grounded in their patriarchal Dalit community, non-Dalit women and Dalit men. Thus, the category of social distancing has exclusive levels of language and power. The WHO eventually dropped the terminology of “social distancing” and started using a new term.
such as “physical distancing.”

... The Indian scenario of social distancing, cleanliness and hygiene have to be probed in the backdrop of the coexistence of changing caste equations and COVID-19. Purity and pollution are central to age-old Indian caste institutions and its brutal forms of caste ideology.

**Education**

The COVID-19 pandemic and the sudden prolonged lockdown threw the education system in the country in disarray. Bheemeshwar Reddy A, Sunny Jose and R Vaidehi (2020) wrote:

> The closure of schools and colleges began before the completion of the end-semester or annual exams and cast a blight on the entire academic cycle. A reinforcing web of issues, such as prolonged closure, uncertainty about the timing of reopening, likely constriction in the academic calendar and the resultant learning discontinuity among students, among others, has forced the states and educational institutions to find a feasible option to assuage the varied impacts.

With the lockdown restrictions in place, policymakers propounded online education as an alternative. Debashis Biswas (2020) noted:

> The guideline regarding maintaining of physical distancing has given the greatest fillip in this regard. This is being actively used as a plea for strongly recommending online education as a substitute for the conventional classroom system.

> As the pandemic period and lockdown restrictions are getting prolonged, issues like completion of syllabus, evaluation, and promotion to higher classes are building pressure with policymakers and experts stressing on the online system as the permanent solution instead of adopting it as a short-run and complementary alternative.

But the turn towards online education during the lockdown has brought to the fore problems of access and inclusivity precipitated by the digital divide.

While online education “has been pontificated to the status of TINA—there is no alternative to it,” Reddy et al (2020) raised some important questions.

> Do the households in general and those who have school/college going students in particular have access to essential digital infrastructure? Will
online education enable all students to participate in and profit from it equally? Or, will it leave behind those who lack access to the digital infrastructure?

They found:

Analysis of the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) data on social consumption of education (2017–18) informs that only about 9% of students who are currently enrolled in any course have access to essential digital infrastructure, and such measly access is enmeshed with huge socio-economic and spatial disparities. Hence, the attempt to make online education an opportunity out of the Covid-19 crisis poses a serious risk of leaving many students, especially the socio-economically disadvantaged, further behind (UNESCO 2020).

Ketan K Shah (2020) also wrote about how an emphasis of online education would only exacerbate pre-existing inequalities in society:

The fundamental requirement for the success of online teaching is the availability of strong internet connectivity and modern-day electronic gadgets. It is well-known that we rank very low with respect to digital infrastructure. It is also not a hidden fact that India suffers from a digital divide. Children in urban areas have better, but not the best, access to these prerequisites compared to children in rural areas. Not all in urban areas have this privilege. Only the well-to-do families can afford costly equipment. In this way, online education becomes a tool to further exacerbate the knowledge divide and thereby widen economic inequalities.

Reddy et al found:

The access to computer with internet is only 8% among students from the Other Backward Classes and 10% among students from the eighth decile (third richest group). Higher the socio-economic disadvantage, much lesser the access. Only 2% of students from the poorest income groups have access to computer with internet, only 3% have access to computer at home and 10% have access to internet through any of the digital devices. Students from Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Scheduled Castes (SCs) also have an equally measly access.

Emphasising that access does not merely imply the availability of the internet, Saumyajit
Bhattacharya (2020) explained:

The mobile phone on which most students access the internet is not the most suitable medium to conduct a class; a laptop is the more suitable device. It is difficult to concentrate on a lecture on the phone, to stare at a small screen for over an hour or two with a reasonable degree of concentration. A recent survey done by the University of Hyderabad in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis shows that only 50% students had access to laptops and about 45% could, at best, access internet infrequently and further about 18% did not have internet access at all (UoH Herald 2020). This is the state of reality in a central university. Indeed, the speed of the internet and its fluctuations have seen major problems in many metro cities, let alone rural or small-town India, where many of our students are under the lockdown.

He went on to explain practical constraints of access to online education:

In a lockdown condition, stuck within home, there are many corners of one’s living space where data signal is weak. Further, many students do not have unlimited Wi-Fi plans, and have limited size data packs. Several classes in a day can be a substantial cost for many students in the low income bracket. We know of several instances where students go out of their home in open street corners to access the internet or free Wi-Fi in normal times; even such ironical possibilities are, of course, closed during a lockdown.

He also highlighted the unequal difficulties faced by female students in attending online classes.

All these problems in access to education during the lockdown have been exacerbated by the lack of an appropriate policy response by the government. Ajay K Singh, Raja Sekhar Satyavada, Tushar Goel, Padma Sarangapani and Nishevita Jayendran (2020) wrote:

The Ministry of Education and state governments are struggling to find an inclusive solution to the crisis in school education precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, providing various “alternative schedules,” “Standard Operating Procedures” and online teaching-based solutions (Times of India 2020; Hindu 2020).

They concluded:
The tendency of e-learning solutions adopted by governments has been towards more centralisation, standardisation across contexts and micro-control of teachers. However, as is evident given the varied means of adoption, such an approach is not feasible simply on account of infrastructure inequalities.

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- India in Lockdown: Eight Questions on the COVID-19 Pandemic | EPW Engage, 2020
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