

The disruption caused by the coronavirus pandemic put India's education sector in a tight spot. It had either to adopt the new system of online education or languish with the offline one. The choice of online education ended up being a heavy burden for many schools, especially those in the under-served hinterlands, the primary reason being the absence of critical infrastructure to make the change seamless. It made critics question the sudden advocacy for digital education on a pan-India scale. In Maharashtra, surveys like the *Active Teachers' Forum* showed the discouraging reality of the 'digital divide'. In a mitigatory effort, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) issued the Alternative Academic Calendar (AAC) for students which laid out guidelines for teachers, students and even parents to ready themselves for online education during the lockdown period. However, these guidelines presume a certain digital preparedness and resourcefulness in adopting online education.

Practical realities

Contrary to the AAC's stated objective of providing ad hoc digital solutions, it presented unreasonable choices for teachers working with limited digital resources, as testified by those interviewed for this article. Since the lockdown started, rural regions in India have witnessed intense social churning, with migrant natives returning from cities due to loss of livelihoods. Even those tending small fields in villages have been feeling the pressure of the downturn in the economy. It was against this bleak backdrop that teachers were expected to engage children in online education on a day-to-day basis. Also, with the lockdown, teachers have had no recourse to in-person classroom sessions. Hence, maintaining regularity in formal education of many first-generation school-goers in the hinterlands has become a gridlock situation.

Specific concerns

Demographics

Discussions with teachers in a few *zila parishad* primary schools in the rural regions of Jawhar,

Mokhada, and Wada blocks of the Palghar district in Maharashtra revealed some interesting details.

These regions are inhabited predominantly by Scheduled Tribes, mainly *Varli*, *Koli Malhar*, *Thakur*, *Mahadev Koli* and *Katkari* tribes. Of these, the *Katkari* is classified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) with a lower socioeconomic status than the others. However, due to the seasonal migration of families to cities as labour, some children from these regions drop out of school. This affects the children's learning levels in the early grades and has an academic impact on their later schooling. Thus, teachers expect these children to attend school from mid-June till the end of September. After that, even if a child migrates with her parents, the thread of learning can be picked up somehow after he or she rejoins the next year.

Keeping in touch

Young children have socio-emotional needs which are often met by the interaction within the social space of the school. Discussions with the teachers showed that their main concern was keeping children connected to the process of schooling - an objective to achieve which online schooling is too impersonal. This realisation also stemmed from the Maharashtra government's earlier (cosmetic) effort of converting state schools into digital schools under its *Educationally Progressive Maharashtra* drive in 2015. The reality, as field visits in the rural Palghar district showed, was that the digital school plan did not achieve much on the ground: it was just a flash in the pan.

The symbolic relevance of schools

The narrative of online education is tied up with the structurally distinct socioeconomic backdrop of the rural Palghar region. As the lockdown started, pictures of deserted city streets were splashed in the media. Rural areas received attention only when hordes of migrant workers from the cities started marching to their native places. In a similar migration, natives of the rural Palghar district, working in the brick kilns and industrial townships

of Thane, Bhiwandi, Vasai, Pune and towns of neighbouring Gujarat, returned to their villages. As the panic of the coronavirus set in, villagers started barricading entry points to their villages. Local teachers were pressed into service to address the panic and social tensions created by the return of migrant natives. Further, as the schools were within the village zones, the teachers had no access to resources in the schools as well.

For a teacher in a rural school, access to the school is symbolically significant. A village school located in an isolated hamlet acts as a source of hope for the locals that the perennial cycle of poverty can be broken. Also, the schools in remote villages are never shut in the conventional sense. Children always have walk-in entries to the school's premises. The school acts as a community space, epistemologically different from other structures nestling in villages. This facet is different than in urban areas, where schools can be just physical structures, empty after classroom hours and lifeless during long vacations.

One teacher said that keeping active the idea of formal schooling was of paramount concern during the lockdown. Anyone working in these regions knows how hard teachers work to raise the consciousness of formal education among local communities. Teachers did not want that consciousness to start diminishing due to schools closing during the lockdown.

Looked at in this context, online education would make the process of learning impersonal and distant, reducing an active teacher to a passive one. Understanding this background is necessary to perceive the unique set of challenges teachers face in these regions. Hence, when the government decreed online education would be the norm, teachers became sceptical and chose a different route.

Taking the school to homes

A strong emotional bond exists between a good teacher and children, particularly in rural areas. A teacher is not only an educator, but acts also as a counsellor, social worker, friend and even as a proxy parent in certain situations, looking after children's overall wellbeing. A good teacher is a greatly respected person in the socioeconomic structure of a village and needs no permission to visit homes and strike up conversations with members of the household.

By leveraging these familial bonds, teachers

decided to take the school activities to the children. They also felt that this strategic coup was needed as formal education is still not perceived as a compulsory requirement among the communities in these regions. It also means the home support required for formal learning, like building informal conversations with children, encouragement for extracurricular reading and writing, etc, is non-existent. The absence of home support and print-rich surroundings make foundational learning an uphill task. Hence, the teachers strongly felt that reaching out to the children for the continuation of learning could not be supplanted by any other means.

Hands-on approach

The teachers decided to print assignment sheets and assemble the students every alternate day at a fixed place in the village. Children who had become used to wandering in the fields or working on their parents' farms in the absence of regular school, were happy to obey, even walking long distances to reach the assembly. Since the teachers have a keen understanding of the learning levels of each child, they were able to identify level-specific tasks for the children and even meet the requirements of any child who was lagging in grade-appropriate learning levels. Children were asked to take the assignment sheets home, work on them and bring them back to the next open class. One teacher even carried some tailor-made laminated sheets that could be wiped over and re-used. Another teacher carried tiles lying in his house and gave them to the students with a whiteboard pen to be used as a makeshift practice board.

The teachers would visit the villages every alternate day to review the children's learning process. One teacher from the hilly regions of Jawhar used the opportunity of doing a social survey for the State to connect with the children who were out of his sight due to the lockdown. Government teachers in urban areas were also compelled to undertake such surveys. While the density of the cities can lead a teacher to strangers' houses, in interior rural areas, a teacher knows the faces he meets during the survey.

Also, a visit to villages in the interior and hilly regions of Jawahar is nothing short of an expedition, particularly in the rainy season when in a downpour, one cannot risk descending the hill in the evening and is better off spending a night in a village. One teacher used the 'expeditions' to carry print-outs of

exercises to paste on the doors of children's homes. He requested parents to encourage children to spend time reading these sheets and in the next visit, he reviewed the children's understanding of the exercises and pasted new ones. One teacher carried a whiteboard with him and put it in a sheltered spot, thus making the whiteboard and the clean floor of a thatched courtyard a makeshift classroom during the teacher's unscheduled visits to these villages.

During all such visits, social distancing was followed to the best possible extent while interacting with children. Children were also repeatedly told to follow better hygiene and sanitation practices in daily life. Thanks to the endeavours of these teachers, learning continued in this hard terrain even in these difficult times.

Serious concerns

Efforts made by the teachers, however modest, matter greatly to keep the chain of formal learning unbroken. The system in which government teachers operate is hierarchical and bound by a top-down approach. Teachers get very little autonomy and even when they exercise it, the watchful eyes of their superiors often dampen their spirit. Although the teachers interviewed for this article were mindful of this reality, they still decided to follow

their instincts in reaching out to the children by exercising their autonomy. They could easily have adopted a passive approach citing unattainability of the online education goal. However, it is their commitment towards the under-served children's formal schooling that prompted them to embrace the offline reality and work towards fixing it.

What if this entire academic year is a washout for face-to-face classroom sessions? Parents from poor families in villages may perceive irregular online education to be futile, knowing there is no substitute for in-person interactions inside school classrooms. In such a scenario, parents may force their children, especially daughters, into staying home and doing household chores. Hence, the efforts of teachers to keep the idea of in-person teaching alive matters a lot during these times.

Efforts are now on to document the ways in which the coronavirus has impacted our beliefs, assessment methodologies and dissemination modes while educating young people. These efforts should also cast their gaze on the efforts of teachers in socioeconomically backward areas, such as those referred to in this article. If it was not for these teachers, several children would otherwise slip between the cracks of online education and remain there, their dreams broken.



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