



IMPLICATIONS OF COVID-19 FOR INDIA'S SCHOOL EDUCATION

Since the breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic, many schools in the world were forced to shift their activities into an online mode in order to continue learning during school closures. While in some countries shift to online learning revealed a potential for innovation in school education, in other countries, it had exacerbated existing problems in the school system and accelerated the education inequality. India having the second-largest school system in the world, where about 260 million students are studying in over 1.5 million schools probably is an exemplary case of how COVID-19 restrictions affected different groups of schoolchildren.

Even though India is the second-largest exporter of international students in the world, the school system faces many challenges due to its large poor population. Accordingly, India has one of the lowest literacy rates in Asia at 74.37%. The pandemic lockdowns further worsened the already significant disparities in schooling. As a result, learning poverty in India increased from 54% to 70% with a high dropout rate in secondary schools.

India, according to the World Inequality Report 2022, is among the most unequal countries in the world, where the top 10% of the population earns 57% of national income and the bottom 50% earns only 17% of national income. Consequently, during the total lockdown, the very bottom of the population was affected more than the other groups by the complications caused by the loss of jobs and restrictions of movement, which also affected their schoolchildren.

Meanwhile, India experienced one of the longest school closures in the world as was affected by multiple waves of COVID-19. Due to the closure of schools for more than a year, schools were tried to transfer traditional in-person classes to other formats like television, radio, WhatsApp groups, Zoom, Skype, and even with the cases of loud-speaker tutorials and building a platform on a tree to reach the students without internet access or weak connection. Yet, given that only 15% of rural households and 42% of urban households have access to the internet, the continuous school closure hugely impacted the ability to get education for those who suffer from the absence of basic digital facilities. As a result, according to the survey by Save the Children, 62% of households surveyed reported the discontinuation of education due to school closure. Another report shows only 37.6 million had access to school education through various online platforms.

The challenges of pandemic school closure in fact added new problems to the existing ones. The lack of personal devices, weak internet connection or lack of connection, and inability to purchase internet packages were among the major problems of accessing online education. The School Children's Online and Offline Learning (SCHOOL) survey report described it as the "fiction of online education", since over 37% of schoolchildren in rural areas are not studying at all in comparison 8% of children studying online. Moreover, the pandemic primarily impacted the economic conditions of families due to job losses, therefore one of the answers from parents was "we were struggling to eat, so how would we manage to get a smartphone?"

The closure of schools in combination with financial downturns led to more severe consequences besides the loss of learning opportunities. It affected girls who spend their days doing household chores or helping their families to earn some money. Girls even have less opportunity to have a smartphone since in most cases the smartphones are given to boys, and if a girl has it, it is difficult to combine education with endless household chores. In addition, many girls faced increasing pressure from their families to get married. Since the girls were free from their basic duty – study, families considered that their daughters did not do anything and have to get settled.

Malnutrition is another problem of lockdowns. The Midday Meal Scheme that provided hot cooked meals every day in government schools also had alterations during the pandemic. Some states decided to provide instead of hot meals cash transfers, while others provided dry rations such as grain and oil, only some states like Telangana delivered hot meals to students. As the OXFAM report shows, 35% of children did not receive their midday meals, 8% received hot meals, 4% received in cash and 53% in dry rations. Although the state tried to support families, not all parents could provide their children with conditions and normal nutrition. Moreover, even though the parents received a certain amount of products supposed to feed their children, it is not impossible to trace how efficiently the products were used.

On top of that, usually, schools provide holistic support to children, conducting regular check-ups, providing basic wash and sanitation facilities, a meal plan, as well as assisting in preventing cases of forced child labor and child marriage. With online education, the school administration hadn't got the

ability to control the well-being of schoolchildren. In addition, due to financial burnouts and the inability to support further children's education, among 14-16 years (grade 10-12) students were recorded the high dropouts from school. Since many families during the pandemic lost their jobs because of lockdowns, families were forced to send their adolescents, with more cases among girls than boys, to earn money.

As a result of the challenges of delivering online education and lack of basic domestic conditions, not surprisingly, the general level of literacy has fallen down dramatically. The examination of third-grade children demonstrated only 25% of students were able to read more than a few words, while another survey revealed that 92% of schoolchildren lost at least one language ability and at least 82% lost at least one mathematical ability due to school closure. Hence, a long-time gap in education for the already low educated schoolchildren has a long-term effect with some sceptics warning about the loss of generation. If comprehensive measures would not be taken to catch up with the school program, especially for the low-income families, more implications would be caused for the whole society.

Despite the impediments to proper school education touched predominantly economically vulnerable groups of the population, other groups of schoolchildren also faced challenges of online education. Even if not considering the basic infrastructure problems due to low living standards, the provided online education also raises a lot of concerns. For instance, only 17% of teachers at government schools and over 43% of teachers at private schools were prepared to conduct online classes. Given that teachers were redesigning their courses in the conditions of no training and limited timeframe, the quality of teaching might have been affected, especially depending on the teaching platforms. Probably television, radio, and WhatsApp groups are less effective for learning in comparison to online video conference technologies, which require additional competencies.

The ongoing pandemic hugely affected the school system in India, whereas if the middle-income class parents could support their children in eliminating caused gaps, the situation with poor families is different. Therefore, the government has to put additional efforts into the education sector and assist the most affected group of schoolchildren to overcome almost two-year lags in learning.

Politics, Foreign Affairs, and Security

- The Foreign Minister of Azerbaijan Ceyhun Bayramov had a telephone conversation with his Armenian counterpart Ararat Mirzoyan. The ministers exchanged views on the development of the recent agreements. The Ministers during the conversation agreed to soon hold a meeting of the joint commission on border delimitation and the working group to prepare a peace agreement (SNG.Today, 25.04.2022).
- The President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev has received the Prime Minister of Belarus Roman Golovchenko in Tashkent, who heads the Belarusian delegation at the International Exhibition "INNOPROM Central Asia". It was noted that bilateral trade between the two countries has increased by 57% since the beginning of this year. The parties reached an agreement on the adoption of a "road map" for the further development of mutually beneficial practical cooperation between Uzbekistan and Belarus (UzReport, 25.04.2022).
- The Speaker of the Parliament of Türkiye Mustafa Sentop paid an official visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Mustafa Sentop was received by members of the Bosnia and Herzegovina Presidential Council and held meetings with other high-ranking officials. During his meeting with the Officials of Bosnia and Herzegovina, he discussed the current state prospects of Cooperation between the Balkans and Türkiye. He also emphasized that the Republic of Türkiye attached great importance to the peace and stability of the Balkans (Anadolu Agency, 26.04.2022).
- The President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev initiated fundamental amendments to the Constitution which would dramatically change the political system of the country. Kazakhstan switches to a brand new state model, a new format of interaction between the state and the society. The President is confident that this brand-new format can be rightly called the Second Republic. Tokayev believes that the constitutional referendum will let each citizen of Kazakhstan take part in determining the fate of the country (Kazinform, 29.04.2022).
- The Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine Andriy Yermak has met with the Presidential Spokesperson of Turkey İbrahim Kalin. The parties discussed a wide range of issues concerning the situation on the frontline and the heroic resistance of the Ukrainian people. Special attention was paid to building a system of effective international security guarantees for Ukraine (Ukrinform.net, 30.04.2022).
- The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Türkiye Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu had a telephone conversation with his Kyrgyz counterpart Jeenbek Kulubaev. The Ministers discussed bilateral relations and an upcoming meeting. The sides hailed the positive dynamics in terms of enhancing bilateral relations and agreed to hold the next meeting of the Joint Strategic Planning Group at the foreign ministry level soon. The parties also discussed holding the strategic cooperation councils meeting with the participation of the presidents of both countries in Kyrgyzstan (Daily Sabah, 01.05.2022).

Economy, Finance, and Energy

- International financial institutions continue providing Uzbekistan with financial assistance. The country has signed loan agreements worth \$575 million with international donors. Uzbekistan will use the funds to support the state budget and investment projects. The World Bank will provide \$200 million for the development of rural entrepreneurship and \$50 million to improve the capacity of the statistical system. The OPEC Fund for International Development and the French Development Agency will provide \$100 million and €150 million, respectively (UzReport, 25.04.2022).
- During a meeting of the intergovernmental commission on economic cooperation, Azerbaijan and Russia signed a number of documents, including a memorandum of cooperation in the field of pensions. Azerbaijani Deputy Prime Minister Shahin Mustafayev stated that a helicopter plant built jointly with Russia may be launched in Azerbaijan in the third quarter of 2022. He added that Azerbaijan invested more than \$1.2 billion in the Russian economy and Russia invested more than \$6 billion (AzerNews, 26.04.2022).
- Bilateral trade between Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan demonstrated record figures in 2022. In particular, since the beginning of 2022 exports from Kazakhstan to Azerbaijan have increased 15 times. As a result, the trade turnover reached \$175 million. During the same period of 2021, this figure amounted to \$12 million. Up to 70% of Kazakhstan's exports are accounted for oil and petroleum products, ore and metal goods. Cargo transportation along the Trans-Caspian route grew by 123% in the first quarter of 2022 (Qazaq TV, 26.04.2022).
- The Deputy Prime Minister of Uzbekistan Sardor Umurzakov received the Minister of Industry and Construction Production of Turkmenistan Baymyrat Annamammedov. The parties noted that over the past 4 years, the volume of Uzbek-Turkmen trade turnover has increased 5 times, and in 2021, the growth of mutual trade amounted to 65% compared to the previous year. The parties agreed to develop new projects of industrial cooperation and trade contracts (Mift.uz, 26.04.2022).
- Bilateral trade volumes between Tajikistan and Iran are demonstrating growth. Over the first quarter of 2022, the figure was valued at about \$66.9 million, which was 4.5 times higher than in the same period last year. A trend toward recovery of the bilateral trade between Tajikistan and Iran began last year. Prior to that, mutual trade between the two countries has fallen from nearly \$300 million in 2013 to \$58 million in 2020 (ASIA-Plus, 27.04.2022).
- Within a business forum of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in Bishkek, the countries reached an agreement that Kazakhstan would supply products worth \$15 million to Kyrgyzstan. The list of products includes foodstuffs, building materials, and medical and chemical products. Kazakhstan was represented by 20 domestic companies. Over the past year, the trade turnover between the two countries amounted to \$971 million. However, experts believe that the potential for joint trade is much higher and is estimated at \$2.5 billion (Qazaq TV, 28.04.2022).

Society and Culture

- The International Organization of Turkic Culture (TURKSOY) and the Kyrgyz Turkish Manas University signed a cooperation protocol aiming at the organization of joint cultural and academic activities. The document was signed by TURKSOY Secretary General Mr. Sultan Raev and Rector of the Kyrgyz Turkish Manas University Prof. Dr. Alpaslan Ceylan. During the meeting, both parties exchanged views on opportunities for cooperation between TURKSOY and the Manas University as well as on joint academic activities they will carry out together (Turksoy.org, 28.04.2022).
- The International Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation hosted an event "Unity of the children of the Turkic World", dedicated to the National Sovereignty and Children's Day of Türkiye. Children representing Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Türkiye, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, took part in the event performing songs, playing national musical instruments, and reading poems expressing the solidarity of the Turkic world. The event was attended by Secretary-General of TurkPA Mehmet Süreyya Er, Members of the Parliaments of the Turkic states, ambassadors of the member states and observers of the Foundation and other officials (Azertag.az, 25.04.2022).
- Parliamentarians of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan took part in the 2nd meeting of the Commission for Cooperation of Öliý Majlis of Uzbekistan and the Parliament of Kazakhstan held in the Kyzylorda region of Kazakhstan. Representatives of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea, the UN and WHO also took part in the meeting. The meeting participants agreed to continue cooperation and intensify work to attract the world community to the problem of the Aral Sea and include it in the agendas of world environmental forums (SNG.Today, 25.04.2022).
- Chairmen of the Constitutional Courts of Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Türkiye, and Uzbekistan signed a document establishing the Organization of the Conference of Constitutional Courts of the Turkic States. The decision was made within the framework of the round table "The Importance of Cooperation between the Bodies of Constitutional Justice" held in Istanbul. The event was held on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the creation of the Constitutional Court of Türkiye. During the event, the participants also signed documents reflecting the strengthening of cooperation between the Turkic-speaking states in constitutional construction (Azertag.az, 27.04.2022).
- Uzbekistan provides humanitarian aid to Afghanistan with a total weight of more than 4,000 tons which included wheat, flour, rice, confectionery and canned food, clothing, essential goods, as well as 100,000 doses of coronavirus vaccine and related tests to determine it. A solemn handover ceremony of the humanitarian cargo to the people of Afghanistan was held in the Afghan city of Hairatan. The delivery was carried out on the eve of the bright holiday of Eid al-Fitr (UzDaily, 30.04.2022).
- A delegation of over 30 representatives of the European Union (EU) and governmental institutions of Uzbekistan visited the Republic of Karakalpakstan. The sides discussed a number of projects presented by the Uzbek Government to stimulate the socio-economic development of the Aral Sea regions in the amount of more than \$210 million. The members of the EU delegation also took part in the campaign of planting 27,000 young trees on the site, which was previously the seabed (AKIpress, 27.04.2022).