

Role Of The Ngos In The COVID -19 Pandemic Towards Ensuring Continued Education Of The Children From The Marginalized Communities In The State Of Maharashtra

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Abstract

“A Nation that has not taken its education into its own hands cannot soon rise in literary, social or political importance” – LokmanyaTilak

LokmanyaTilak was the pioneer in promoting quality education in India. Although India has been on the path of ensuring quality education to all the children, it is the recent COVID pandemic that has derailed this development path. The pandemic has thrown out key loopholes in our educational system where the children from the vulnerable and marginalized sections of the society have been pushed out of the education system. It shows that there is still a long path towards realizing LokmanyaTilak’s vision of universal education. It is in this context that a study was undertaken to bring focus on the challenges faced by the vulnerable children in pursuing education in the time of COVID pandemic.

Maharashtra has a long history of progressive movements and social work. It was found that the NGOs and social workers played an important role in reaching out to these children even in the Pandemic. Hence, the paper specifically focuses on the role played by these NGOs. A total of nine NGOs participated in this study. Telephone interviews were conducted with the social workers of the NGOs. The study provides an important account of the challenges of the vulnerable children

and the methods in which the NGOs attempted to address these challenges. The study shows how the challenges were multidimensional in nature. The education of these children was adversely affected due to highly vulnerable livelihoods of their parents, the digital divide, and also the gender divide. The paper further provides accounts of the innovative methods employed by NGOs to overcome some of the challenges. Finally, the paper provides suggestions towards developing a more resilient educational system for the vulnerable children.

Key words: Covid-19 pandemic, Role of NGOs, Education, Vulnerable Children, Online learning.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted adversely the overall educational systems in the World. Closure of schools and other learning spaces have adversely impacted 94 percent of the World’s students (UN Report, 2020). Up to 99 per cent of students have been affected in the low and lower- middle income countries. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the learners and the teachers around the world, from pre-primary to secondary schools, technical and vocational education and training institutions, universities, adult learning and skills development establishments. By mid- April 2020, 94 percent of learners worldwide were affected by the pandemic, representing 1.58 billion children and youth, from pre-primary to higher education, in 200 countries.

Role Of The Ngos In The COVID -19 Pandemic Towards Ensuring Continued Education Of The Children From The Marginalized Communities In The State Of Maharashtra

In developing countries, distance learning platforms were introduced by various organizations, schools and colleges in India. It has major consequences for organisations that normally support vulnerable children. More than half of the organisations (57%) are working to continue education of children and youth. This includes support and guidance to parents (41%), digital interventions (34%), and lessons via radio/tv (15%). In addition, 41% are providing support to mitigate the impact of the crisis by distributing food (25%), cash assistance to vulnerable families (13%), and child protection & violence prevention activities (27%) (Aflatoun International, 2020)

NGOs also tried that the benefits of the Right to Education Act 2009 reach the most deprived children, it ensures all children are able to go to school and become confident to deal with life situations and to contribute to the nation. They have enhanced the spread of education, awareness amongst the parents and the communities. Further, they have also improved the quality education among the most deprived children to make learning a fun experience. NGOs are doing large level enrollment drives for out-of- school and vulnerable children and mapped them to enroll into formal schools. They have made effort that no child is left behind when it comes to getting education (*Jagannathanthe, 2001*) Thus, when the pandemic hit India, NGOs given their deep connect in combating various socio-economic issues, have been a natural partner in this endeavour providing basic amenities and spreading awareness.

India faces tremendous challenges in ensuring universal coverage of online education. Due to lack of internet connectivity, information technology, educational materials and digital technology skills, distance learning is difficult for teachers and students in developing countries. India also faces the challenge of poverty-linked vulnerabilities of its population. Poor families and students do not have adequate access to digital resources (Mustafa, 2020). The Maharashtra State Education Department implemented various online learning platforms during Covid-19 but most of the children could not benefit from it. The survey conducted by the Maharashtra State Council of Education Research and Training (MSCERT) and UNICEF, found that only fifty per cent of students from government schools in classes I to VIII could access digital learning (Goradia, 2020).

It was in this context, that a study was conducted to understand the ground-realities of the vulnerable children and the role that the NGOs and social workers played in supporting these children. There were two-fold objectives of the study. First objective was to understand the challenges faced by the vulnerable communities and children in pursuing education during a pandemic. Second objective was to understand the role of NGOs and methods employed by them to address the challenges. The study follows a qualitative approach and makes use of the interview method of data collection. The study was conducted through interviews with NGOs working in Thane, Mumbai, Aurangabad, Jalgaon, Pune, and Kolhapur districts of the State of Maharashtra. Total nine NGOs were included in this study. Due to the restrictions of the pandemic, the interviews were conducted on Google Meet, the online meeting platform. The NGOs were selected by using purposive sampling methods covering different regions of Maharashtra. The respondents of study were the Director, the Programme Manager, and the Coordinators of the NGOs. The data collected based on a checklist prepared for the online interview. The table 1 below gives the profile of NGOs interviewed for the study.

Table 1. Profile of NGOs included in the Study

Sr. No	Name Of the NGO	Location	Work Area
1	<i>Vacha</i>	Andheri, Mumbai	Empowerment of girls and women

2	<i>Pratham</i>	Talasari, <i>palghar</i>	Community-based and low-cost early childhood education. Universalization of pre-primary and primary education in metropolis.
3	Signal School <i>Samarth Bharat Vyaspeeth</i>	Thane City, Thane District	Provide education to underprivileged children living on street traffic signals
4	<i>YuvaSanskarBahuuddeshiyaSantha</i>	Dhaivali, <i>Shapur</i>	Empowerment of tribal and poor communities in rural areas
5	<i>Khelghar</i>	Pune City, Pune District	Provide education and life skill to children living in urban slums
6	Magic Bus Foundation	Aurangabad District	Childhood to livelihood to adolescent children in urban and rural areas
7	<i>Vardhishnu</i> Social Research and Development Society	Jalgaon District	To create spaces of learning and support to street children specially child waste pickers and child labours
8	<i>PalakSanvedanaManch</i>	Kolhapur City, Kolhapur District	Working with 47 economical backward community children's nearby Kolhapur district

Role Of The Ngos In The COVID -19 Pandemic Towards Ensuring Continued Education Of The Children From The Marginalized Communities In The State Of Maharashtra

9	<i>Saher, Bin Gantichi Shala</i>	Bhiwandi, <i>Thane</i>	Working with children of domestic workers
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Vulnerabilities of Marginalized Communities Exposed in the Pandemic: Implications on Continuity of Education Among Children

The vulnerabilities of the socio-economically marginalized communities towards continued education were exposed during the COVID pandemic. Children from different marginalized communities, like tribals, waste pickers, slum dwellers, faced the brunt of the lockdown more heavily than children from well to do backgrounds. These marginalized children depend on Government-run schools. However, the government-run education system was not able to provide adequate response to ensure continuation of education of these children. The NGOs working in the tribal areas reported that the schools were shut and the teachers never visited the villages nor took any initiative to engage in alternative methods of education. In such situations the NGOs and social workers played an important role to support the children in ensuring continuation of their educational activities. The NGOs reported how the school teachers just collected information of the educational activities undertaken by the NGOs and went to the extent of asking the NGOs to share the attendance of children in such activities to be reported to government on behalf of the school.

Apart from the complete shutting down of formal government-run schooling system, the marginalized children faced the brunt of severe hardships due to loss of job and income of their parents. The situation was so worse that the NGOs observed that the pandemic has caused a complete reversal of the development process of children to the extent that it has severely affected their mental and physical health. NGOs have observed that the impact was so severe that children lost their weight due to lack of adequate food and nutrition in the family. One girl from the community committed suicide because she could not give food to her family for three days. Instances of child marriages increased in this period. Children had to engage themselves in labor work involving selling vegetables, street work, and collecting waste.

Due to social isolation, many children were getting irritated and experienced mental stress. Also the children spent lot of time on watching TV and other social media which reduced their interest from the education and study. This decreased their speed of writing and reading. The majority of the students could not enroll for further education, especially students of 10th and 12th standard, which will lead to drop out from the education system.

The study showed that the pandemic has completely transformed the world and experiences of children from good to worse. They have been pushed back to severe poverty and deprivation. This has exposed the vulnerabilities of these marginalized children; especially towards continuation of education is such a crisis situation. These marginalized communities do not have any support system to overcome the challenges. All this has affected the educational pursuits of children who are among the first generation learners in the families belonging to the marginalized communities. The study shows, how in this context that the NGOs played an important role in not only supporting education activities but also in providing access to basic necessities like food and health services.

Overcoming Digital Divide: Biggest Educational Challenge in Pandemic

The biggest challenge that the NGOs faced in their support for educational activities for marginalized children was the inequitable access to the modern information and communication technology. The children from middle income and above were able to overcome the challenge of education by replacing the off-line school with the on-line schooling activities. But the children from marginalized communities did not have access to the smart gadgets as well as to the internet. Their families' very facing basic challenge of ensuring adequate food and shelter for their families. It was beyond their capacity to afford the modern technology for their children. Even in urban slums, like the NGO working in Kolhapur slums, found that only 60% of the parents of these children had mobile phone. This phone was always with their father and children had very less access to the same. Due to loss

of income, even those who had mobile phone found it difficult to recharge their phones with talking and internet time. This digital divide in the society was the biggest challenge in ensuring continued education of these children. The NGOs and social workers played an important role in overcoming the digital divide.

It was this challenge that prompted several NGOs to develop innovative methods to reach out to the children. They evolved various mechanisms of sharing of smart phones among larger groups of children. They were able to link those who have smart phones in the community with a particular group of children. This required mobilization and participatory approach among several members in the community, like the school management committees, Grampanchayat members, local teachers, and other such community volunteers. Study material was prepared and sent on WhatsApp to these volunteers and they in turn shared the same with the given group of children. The NGOs took extra efforts to conduct training of these volunteers who were involved in this technology sharing programme. In certain cases, where the NGOs could raise funds, new smartphones were bought and provided to group of children. In tribal areas, the NGOs organized special study centers for particular group of children.

The study center was coordinated by a social worker who was equipped with the smart phones. The children attended the study center to get access to digital study material and activities. One of the most innovative methods used by an NGO was to substitute the internet based learning by radio-based learning. They created educational content on radio and broadcasted it for the children. One or more radio is generally available even in remote villages. NGOs found that it is one of the most cost-effective medium as it does not require purchase of new gadgets or does not have a recurring cost like internet charges. The social workers ensured that children came together at specific time to listen to the radio broadcast.

Even when NGOs were trying best to overcome the digital divide they realized that many children were still left out and the resources available were not adequate to reach out to every child in the community.

Innovative Educational Inputs: Online-Offline Mix

NGOs implemented new innovative ideas to provide educational opportunities to the children using a combination of online and offline mode of learning. Since, there were several constraints on continuous online access, the NGOs devised methods of intermittent online instructions combined with offline activities at home. They used to give activities as homework to the children for a week and asked them to submit it to community workers. One activity per week was assigned. Activities were developed such that children can continue their mathematical, communication and writing skills using the resources around their house. Some such activities included: counting advertisements coming on television, counting available spoons & bowls at home, interactions with neighbours and writing briefs on such interactions. NGOs found that such activities kept children engaged in creative activities and thereby reduced the anxiety and insecurity related to the pandemic. Some NGOs were also able to develop special recorded video sessions on mathematics and other topics. Videos on career guidance were prepared and shared for students of 10th standard. These videos were sent to the volunteers and the volunteers in turn organized the group of children to give access to the videos. Bigger NGOs, like Pratham, were able to create their own mobile application for educational activities for children. Through these application, the NGOs was able to conduct activities like quiz competition, essay competition, among children from a cluster of villages. Some NGOs also provided inputs on myths and misconceptions about the COVID among children.

Several NGOs introduced mobile libraries where they used to send scanned copies of study material on mobile to the volunteers. They also distributed books physically wherever possible through the volunteers. Books were given on rotation basis to the children. Stationary was also provided to the children to write about their experiences and thoughts in form of a 'Corona Diary'. Some NGOs used the digital platform to promote creation of study environment at home. They have introduced the idea of 'Study Corner'. In this, they sent videos on how to decorate a small place for study at home. These videos were sent to parents, members of the school management committee and other such volunteers from the community. The children decorated the place with the help of youths and community workers and sent photo back to the NGOs through these volunteers. NGOs found that such activity helped the children in creating a school-like environment in their house that helped them pursue the homework and other educational activities assigned by the social workers. Some of the NGOs were able to coordinate and mobilize children through digital media to conduct offline night school.

Role Of The Ngos In The COVID -19 Pandemic Towards Ensuring Continued Education Of The Children From The Marginalized Communities In The State Of Maharashtra

Coordination and communication of educational activities was achieved by creation of different WhatsApp groups. Separate groups were created of social workers, social workers and community volunteers, and wherever possible with the children. NGOs imparted training to the volunteers and others who were not exposed to WhatsApp. This involved training of how to send homework activities and how to collect and assess the same through WhatsApp.

Overcoming Gender Divide: Increased Vulnerability of Girl Child

The pandemic also exposed the gender bias among the communities in imparting educational opportunities. The girl children faced the brunt of the pandemic more than the boy children. Many NGOs, especially those working specifically for empowerment of girl children, clearly observed the trend towards higher restrictions on girl child in her educational pursuits. The girl child was made to take higher responsibility of the household work like cooking and cleaning. This was acute during pandemic because all the family members were confined inside houses due to the lockdown and lack of employment. The elders in the family members started keeping close eye on the activities of the girl child. This problem increased to the extent that it became a hurdle for the NGOs to get girl child out of the house to attend digital learning sessions at the NGO center or at the place where smart phones were shared among groups. The elders also started keeping a watch of the phone calls made by social workers to the girl child to follow-up on educational activities.

NGOs were also involved in counseling with girl children and their parents through phone calls and other social media. This helped in bringing focus on girl education within the family. The NGOs observed that there were larger instances of child marriage during the pandemic period. To tackle this problem the counseling and rapport building with parents through digital channels helped the NGO workers to stop some of the child marriages. Due to the rapport and contact with the girl children the NGOs found that these girl children gained confidence in coming out of their houses. As a result of this situation many girls from the communities came forward and approached the NGOs to open their centers. Later with the help of these girls, the NGOs were also able to distribute ration, medical kits, and other necessities in the community severely affected by the lockdown. All the work, including distributing rations in the communities, was handled by the girls. As an outcome of this work, the NGOs found that this became an alternative mode of empowerment and learning for the girl children.

Conclusion: Lessons for a Resilient Educational System for Vulnerable Children

The paper throws light on the multi-dimensional challenges of ensuring continuity of education of children from the marginalized communities during the time of health disaster like the COVID pandemic. Unlike other disasters, the severity of adverse impacts of pandemic is acute do to the loss of employment and income of marginalized communities. Under severe economic and social crisis, the education of their children became the last priority for these vulnerable communities. Short-term objectives like securing food and basic income overshadowed the important objective of securing better life for children through education. This has completely thrown the formal educational system out of reach to these vulnerable children. The study presents the challenges and opportunities found by NGOs in the field of education during a disaster like the COVID pandemic. There are several lessons from the study that will help in creating a more disaster- resilient educational system for the vulnerable children.

A broader lesson is around the overall livelihood and other economic and social vulnerabilities of the marginalized communities that put the education of their children at risk. So it is very important to work towards creating sustainable livelihoods sources for such communities. This is the backbone on which the resilient education system for such children can stand. However, there are lessons related to ensuring that the education system is also able to absorb the shocks when a COVID-like disaster strikes. The need to close the digital divide is the most important task in such case. When offline education opportunities close, there is no option but to provide all possible online education access to the vulnerable children. This requires creation of the digital infrastructure in rural as well as in urban slums. Apart from physical infrastructure there is also need to create innovative digital content that is created by keeping the specific requirements of these children in mind. During the pandemic, the NGOs have experimented with many different innovative methods, like creation of a special mobile application, of reaching out to the children through a mix of online and offline mode. The digital infrastructure along with special education contents will help in developing a resilient educational system that can support the vulnerable children in times of disasters. It will also become a medium for increasing the

outreach of education in normal times by ensuring higher enrolment on the same digital content platform. The study highlights one more important challenge of gender equity. The study found that it is the girl child that is the most vulnerable with regards to education related priority in a family during the pandemic. NGOs played important role on bringing the focus on education of girl child even in the pandemic.

Overall, the study shows that the challenges of education of vulnerable children are multi- dimensional. It is necessary to address the issues of sustainable livelihoods, digital infrastructure, education content, and gender equity to move towards more resilient education system. There is a need to work on creating such a resilient education system in the normal period so that any future disaster will not destroy the education opportunities of the vulnerable children.

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