



## **DIGITAL DIVIDE: A DETRIMENTAL BLOW TO EDUCATION SECTOR WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MEDIA STUDENTS**

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**Abstract:** *Online classes are a new paradigm for teaching and learning. Online learning has replaced the traditional way of classroom teaching in the hour when a fatal and little-known virus was posing risk for us all. Since the inception of the Internet, the world hasn't seen such a wide application of the same in the education sector. India too is no exception. Online education offers several advantages to the new generation. Besides all the advantages there are many disadvantages of this form of education. Developing countries like India where the majority of the population depends on agricultural activities for their livelihood and resides in rural villages cannot afford such expensive electronic gadgets and good quality internet connections for online classes.*

*This is high time to evaluate the pros and cons of online education. This study involves the Media students of a Metropolitan city in India. Mass Media is different from other social science subjects. Mass media includes both theoretical and practical knowledge, unlike other social subjects which are mainly theory-based. This particular study has gone through in-depth interview method to find the impact of online education on Media studies students.*

**Keywords:** *Digital Divide, E-learning, M learning, Media Studies, Online Education*

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The global disruption to the education sector caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was the world's worst education crisis ever. Schools and colleges were all closed to combat the spread of the disease. To ensure the continuity of education, all classes were shifted to online mode. Many students found the online mode of learning helpful but for many, it was of no



use. Online education demands electronic gadgets with uninterrupted internet connection which is not possible for many to afford. Reasons are sundry. During the pandemic, the unemployment rates were touching heights and in that kind of financial instability, many families were forced to put their children out of schools and colleges. Uninterrupted internet connection is also a far-reaching dream in many parts of our country.

Media studies is somewhat different from other social science subjects as it needs thorough practical training along with theoretical classes. It is thus difficult for both teachers and students to cope with online practical classes without any preparation. Economic problem, digital illiteracy and sometimes even gender issues are barriers for online education. This article focuses on reality of online media education through interviewing of some of the media students.

### **Literature Review:**

Some literature surveyed was given in the following manner.

#### Lockdown: A Major Cause of Unemployment

The first case of the novel virus was reported in Wuhan City of Hubei provinces of China, in November 2019. The World Health Organisation (WHO) confirmed the Coronavirus disease 2019 as a global health emergency on 30<sup>th</sup> January 2020 in China. On 11<sup>th</sup> March 2020, WHO declared COVID-19 as a pandemic. The coronavirus outbreak remains one of the worst global pandemics in decades.

On 30<sup>th</sup> January 2020, India reported its first COVID positive case in Kerala. Till 8<sup>th</sup> May 2020, the number of COVID-infected patients in India reached 56,342. (Gautam, Pathak and Ahamad). On 24<sup>th</sup> March 2020, the Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi called for a complete nationwide lockdown for 21 days to restrain the spread of the deadly virus. Later the lockdown was extended. In this course of time, 'Janata Curfew' was imposed, and all public places like shopping malls, multiplex, food courts, government, and non-government offices, and all educational institutions were shut.

In April 2020, the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimated nearly 2.5 crore jobs could be lost worldwide due to the pandemic. Further, it observed that more than 40 crore informal workers in India may get pushed into deeper poverty due to the pandemic. During the April-June quarter of 2020, the unemployment rate in urban areas rose to 20.9%.



Numerous students were forced to quit education due to the financial dispute caused during the pandemic. The report of Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) monitored that unemployment rates in India jumped to 29% since the lockdown which started in March 2020. Government service recruitments were stopped and many job holders lost their jobs in the pandemic. The huge unemployment rates can be cited as a prime reason for many students to discontinue education (Ali and Kamraju).

### Digital Divide

Since the end of the 1990s 'Digital Divide' has been a central issue of new media development. The digital divide is discrimination of access to technology in society or uneven distribution in access to, use of, or impact of information technology. Most notably, the term access is not clearly defined anywhere. There is a huge difference between theoretical access and effective access. Theoretical Access is mainly when a person has physical access to technology like the number of households who are having computer networks or the internet at home. Effective access refers to the ability, desire, and motivation to use technology and to be able to achieve benefit from it. Thus, the main difference lies between access to computers and access to meaningful, useful, and relevant content for the user. In India, digital disparities are seen among individuals in the same educational institutes, and the reason is not only restricted within the geographical areas but largely economic factors, gender gap, electricity issues, and many more.

Multiple scholars and theorists believe that among all the other factors the urban-rural factor is the most important determinant but we also cannot ignore the economic divide which leads to the digital divide. There are multiple consequences of the digital divide which include isolation, educational barriers, and gender discrimination.

The pandemic locked everyone in their houses and forced them to work and study from home. The closing of schools due to the lockdown affected millions of school-going learners all around the world. Sharif Khan and Lalit Lalitav Mohakud cited in their book "The Novel COVID-19: The Human Rights Issues in India" that some 3.6 billion people which comprised almost half of the earth's population did not have access to the internet at the end of 2019. As of March 2020, the Internet Penetration Rate (IPR) was 55.10%. Within India, Mumbai had the maximum number of internet users (13 million) followed by Delhi (11.3 million), Bengaluru (6.6 million), Kolkata (6.2 million), and Chennai (6.0 million) (Khan and Mohakud).



### Economic Crisis: A Major Reason for the Digital Divide

The pandemic had a drastic effect on the Indian economy, and unemployment rates were high. UNICEF stated that with the combined effect of the demand shock and supply disruptions followed by the lockdown, the growth rate projections for the Indian economy for 2020-21 have continuously fallen from 1.9% in April 2020 to 1.2% in May 2020. India for the first time in 40 years had a negative growth rate.

In this kind of economic turmoil, many students discontinued education due to unemployment. A large number of girls dropped out of school. Poverty rates were increasing, many unemployed families could not afford the minimum school fees due to debts. Boys were instructed to work as daily wage labours, while girls were assigned home chores.

Many students who were studying before the pandemic did not return to class again as their families did not find the education sector a good option to drain all their savings. An 18-year-old, class 12 student from Delhi, Nisha was forced to discontinue her education during the pandemic as her father who previously worked as a security guard at a private firm in Gurugram lost his job. For an entire year, they survived on their savings (India Today).

### Steps Taken By the Indian Government To Promote Online Education Among The Poor And Rural Students

The Government of India undertook many initiatives to promote online education during the pandemic. The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) made several arrangements to make online learning easy and productive. Arrangements like online portals and educational channels through Direct to Home (DTH), Radio for students to continue with their learning, and many more arrangements were made for promoting online education during the pandemic.

Some initiatives taken by MHRD for secondary education are:

Diksha, e-Pathshala, National Repository of Open Educational Resources (NROER).

Initiatives taken by the MHRD for higher education are:

Swayam, Swayam Prabha, e-PG Pathshala.



Apart from these, governments of many states distributed free smartphones and tablets for promoting online education. The smartphones were modified in such a way that they could only be used for educational purposes.

The Chief Minister of West Bengal Mamata Banerjee provided free smartphones to the class 12 students of government schools, government-aided schools, and Madrasas of West Bengal. The government transferred money to students' bank accounts so that they can buy tablets or smartphones to continue with online classes.

The Government of Delhi also distributed free tablets among the class XI students to make online classes accessible. The department of education also asked the computer science teachers to provide technical assistance to the students who faced any problems during the online classes.

The Haryana Chief Minister Manohar Lal Khattar announced that free tablets will be given to the students of classes XI and XII from the new academic session. The government decided to spend Rs 560 crore on this project.

B S Yediyurappa, Chief Minister of Karnataka started an initiative to promote online education during the pandemic. Tablets were distributed among 1.55 lakh students across the state.

In Jharkhand, the superintendent of police Shams Tabrez Simdega distributed free smartphones to the students of various government schools in the state. The Jharkhand police received 13 laptops, 23 personal computers, 926 smartphones, and 13 tablets across 432 police stations in Jharkhand through donations from the public. The corporates also contributed 23 smartphones, 1 laptop, and 20 personal computers.

In Jammu and Kashmir, it was announced that free tablets will be distributed among 75,000 first-year students from various undergraduate courses and 2,000 tribal community school students from the state (edugraph).

### **Methodology**

Interview of five media students from different colleges of Kolkata has been conducted. The interview has been taken via email. The interviews are through structured questionnaire and in-depth study.

### **Data Interpretation**



### Interviews of Five Media Students from Different Colleges in Kolkata

This section has been incorporated to achieve the objectives of the study. Media students from different colleges in Kolkata were interviewed to gather their experience and point of view on the online mode of education, whether they liked the new way of learning or not, the difficulties faced by them, and many more.

The media students interviewed are Soumyadeep Sarkar, Rick Sarkar, Labani Sarkar, Sulagno Karmakar, and Aritra Chakrabarti. All of them experienced online education during the pandemic. The analysis of their interview is as follows.

The first question revolves around whether they regularly attended online classes during the lockdown, and if not, what were the reasons for not attending the online classes.

Soumyadeep Sarkar stated that he attended online classes regularly. The only time he could not attend classes was when he was sick and had internet connectivity issues. These problems did not stop him from being regular.

Rick Sarkar, another media student responded that he tried to be regular in classes as much as possible. Sometimes medical emergencies and timings of the classes restricted him from attending online classes.

Labani Sarkar attended online classes regularly and did not highlight any reasons that stopped her from attending online lectures.

Sulagno Karmakar also did not face any problems and regularly attended online classes during the lockdown.

Aritra Chakrabarti mentioned that he made sincere efforts to be regular and attend all the possible lectures but at times he could not size himself with the online schedule.

Online education is better than the traditional mode of education. The media students were asked to present their point of view for the statement.

According to Soumyadeep Sarkar, online education utilizes digital tools and methods of teaching, and offline education uses traditional methods. Online education is not a proper alternative to traditional education because the latter is not affected by technical issues at any point and provides an excellent opportunity for students to develop a strict schedule and adhere to it. Additionally, offline education allows teachers to monitor the responses, and behaviours of the students and accordingly address them as and when required.



To Rick Sarkar, online and offline education both had their pros and cons and none is perfect. The amalgamation of both modes of teaching termed the blended more is favoured.

Labani Sarkar highlighted students' lack of concentration and motivation in online classes and stated online education is not better than offline education.

Sulagno Karmakar, opinionated that to a certain extent, online education has specific advantages which are absent in physical classes, but mostly online education is not as effective as offline education. Physical classes restrict students to hold certain formal body postures. In online classes, if one doesn't like any ongoing class then he/she can sign off and get the study materials and other gist of unattended classes from friends. Some professors explain any particular topic thoroughly through line-by-line depiction in each slide from PPT. Physical classes generally make the teacher explain only the overview. Teachers can easily access the internet and show the students some content related to our studies through screen share. That's very useful. physical classes have lot more advantages than online classes. The interactive session, face-to-face communication, and visual appearance of teachers and students all are helpful to coordinate with each other. Internet issue is the major drawback in online classes. So, in this prospect, traditional classes are better than online classes.

Aritra Chakrabarti preferred the traditional mode of education.

The students were asked about the advantages and disadvantages of online education.

Soumyadeep Sarkar mentioned that online education is time-saving since students don't need to travel to schools or colleges, students having social anxiety feel comfortable interacting in an online class, and technical skills development. On the other hand, online learning promotes isolation. Socializing factor is missing in the online mode of education. Concentrating in online classes is difficult at times.

Rick Sarkar stated online education provides the comfort of attending classes from home. But the main disadvantage is the connectivity issue. In a country like India where the digital divide is still prevalent online education is something difficult to attend.

Labani Sarkar said online education is a flexible process and helps to learn more technical skills. She also stated the list of disadvantages is longer than the list of advantages. Online education offers limited interaction, students from not a strong financial background who cannot afford a good internet connection cannot attend online classes properly. In online education, a teacher is not able to monitor students' activities.



Sulagno Karmakar stated there are advantages of online classes only if students have access to necessary technical gadgets and sufficient internet connection. In a twisted sense, online classes are beneficial for multitasking like, doing household work as well as attending classes. One can adjust his/her surrounding ambiance to concentrate in an online class. The absence of a physical journey preserves a lot of energy to attend long lectures and consequent classes. There are a whole bunch of disadvantages like internet issues, noise (dysfunctional transmission of signal), and absence of visual appearance. Some teachers felt that they are teaching walls because of the absence of visual appearance. Students are less likely to respond in class and also take unfair advantage of internet disconnection to avoid answering questions. Interruption by other people near one's friends, phone calls, and glitches in PPT presentation all are there. Most importantly, a long screen time leads to stress.

Aritra Chakrabarti also stressed the aspect of flexibility as the main advantage of online education. The major disadvantages according to him are: due to its time-specific nature a student can't communicate and clarify all of their doubts and internal limitations including nervousness, peer pressure, anxiety, etc. A major disadvantage of online education is that it generates a sense of disinterest towards future ambition, career goals, and life achievements restricting students' capability to take risks and embrace them. It becomes a likely scenario in online education that many students apply for side internships in continuation with their studies which is a good thing if it's in the interest of gaining experience but in most the cases it turns out to be for earning chump changes which at the same time is very problematic resulting a shift in their object of orientation.

The next question was asked to know whether all had a Wi-Fi connection pre COVID or were they forced to take the connection during the lockdown for attending online classes.

All the interviewees except Labani Sarkar had a Wi-Fi connection in their house before COVID. Labani Sarkar used her mobile data to attend her online classes during the lockdown.

This question revolves around the problems faced by the media students while doing their online practical classes.

Soumyadeep Sarkar, Rick Sarkar, and Labani Sarkar stated that very few practical classes were conducted which was not enough for them to learn properly. Practical classes on Google Meet, and Zoom did not turn out to be a good way of gaining practical knowledge. Students took the help of YouTube videos to learn practical.





Sulagno Karmakar stated in their first semester, online practical classes were pretty much successful as they learned to write reports, anchor stories, etc. Description of format is enough. In terms of tabloid making, their team didn't face any issues because their instructor exemplified the methods and procedures of editing practically by showcasing the editing through google meet quite comprehensively. The problem we faced was in radio classes. Students did not get the opportunity to see consoles, microphones, editing tools, and their functioning, therefore the students had to record their voices in different program formats.

Aritra Chakrabarti did not find online practical classes to be fruitful. The media students were asked whether all their classmates attended the online classes regularly. And if not, what were the probable reasons behind not attending class. All the interviewees had the same response. Their classmates did not regularly attend classes during the lockdown. The reasons they cited were choppy internet connection and technological glitches. Another main problem faced by their classmates was staying loose and easing off.

The next question aimed to know whether the attendance of male students was more than female students.

All five interviewees stated that the attendance of female students was always more than male students in the online class during the lockdown. Lockdown kept many girls out of education. Respondents were asked about their opinion on this particular statement. Everyone agreed with the statement and shared their opinions.

Soumyadeep Sarkar mentioned that in India girls are forced to marry at a younger age. Parents of girl children plan to save money for getting their daughter married rather than investing in education. During the pandemic, many girls had to quit education since their parents did not provide the necessary gadgets and internet connection required for attending an online class.

Rick Sarkar shared an incident where gender biases are observed. The domestic helper of his house has 2 children. One boy studying in class four and a girl studying in class twelve. The family owns one smartphone. In their family, the two children had to share one smartphone for attending classes. The boy was allowed to attend classes four days a week and the girl attended online classes twice a week which is not enough for a student who will be appearing for board exams. This incident shows how males are given more preference in terms of education.



Labani Sarkar also shared a similar incident where the siblings had to share a single device for attending classes which resulted in the missing out classes of the girl child.

According to Sulagno Karmakar in rural or peripheral areas where most girls spend their labor and time doing household jobs out of compulsion such as financial obligations or due to norms. Most of the girls still get married at an early age and the commencement of lockdown and online classes are the catalysts of that. Lack of internet facilities and poor access to and affordability of computers, and mobiles, especially in rural areas are some of the heart-breaking reasons for their discontinuation in studies.

Aritra Chakrabarti agreed with the statement but has no personal acquaintance of any girls forced to quit education due to lockdown.

The last question was asked to know the opinion of the students about the blended mode of learning.

Soumyadeep Sarkar was well in favor of a blended mode of education if the institutions can handle it properly.

Rick Sarkar cited blended mode of education will be beneficial for the students but the traditional mode of education is equally important and cannot be ignored.

Labani Sarkar did not show a positive attitude towards a blended mode of education. She stated in a country like India where many people cannot afford a good quality internet connection blended learning will be of no use. The governments are taking initiatives to make online classes accessible to all but this process will require time.

Sulagno Karmakar stated a full online mode or offline mode is preferred because students need different mindsets to coordinate with online and physical classes. A blended mode of education is difficult to cope with. Furthermore, organizers of the routine for blended mode should be careful about the timing. They shouldn't place an ending of online class 30 or even 1 hour before the beginning of a physical class because many students come from distant places to college. Blended mode is only helpful both for teachers and students if only practical classes are taken physically and theory classes digitally. Aritra Chakrabarti preferred a blended mode of education but when then there is a proper infrastructure.

Online education is the new paradigm of teaching and learning. Teachers and students all around the globe had no other option other than adapting e-learning due to the pandemic.



Many students found the digital mode of learning very useful conditioned to the proper availability of internet connection and electronic gadgets. India is a developing country where the majority of the population are from a poor financial background, and the digital divide is pertinent in all its terms. India in the present moment is not fully equipped to make education reach extreme corners of the nation via digital mode. The government is tirelessly working to ensure children from diverse backgrounds have sustainable access to electronic gadgets and uninterrupted internet connections.

Interview was conducted among only five media students of Kolkata, which is not really enough to understand the situation. They favoured the traditional mode of education and mentioned choppy internet connections to be the main reason for not attending online classes regularly even belonging from urban class. They stated the pros and cons of online education but the list of disadvantages is more than advantages. Not only the students from poor financial backgrounds face troubles attending online lectures but also students with stable financial conditions faced similar difficulties. Poor financial conditions and high rates of unemployment during the pandemic also resulted in a gender divide. Many girls were forced to quit education. Families who could afford one electronic device allowed only the male child to attend classes. As the reality is harsh, post pandemic situation depends on blended mode of education in many cases.

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