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An Exploratory Study On The Impacts Of Covid-19 On The Indian Higher Education Landscape: Contemporary Issues And Recommendations

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Abstract:Education isthe backbone of any economy. Education extends the country's scope for development and a global position. Indian education system thus evolved with the traditional mode of Guru Kula system and now has reached to a sphere of change and rapid interventions such as the digital learning system by which the world and the word education is seeing an aspirational future. Covid-19, a pandemic that marked its first outbreak at Wuhan in China that soon claimed the entire globe to be in its clutches. The Government of India jointly in cooperation with the state governments in its palm declared a lockdown of the nation to bring down the spread of the outbreak by putting a nationwide standstill in all respects. By the mid of March 2020 when this shutdown (to be referred as lockdown throughout the article) was called in, all educational institutions in the country, no matter the levels of study where initially put under its purview and most of the examinations such as the public (board) examinations, entrance examinations etc. were put to hold as to bring down the rampant impacts of this pandemic. This has bring about a novel and an ambitious mode of learning which by all means a distant dream to many i.e. online education was. This paper is an attempt to showcase the impacts of the pandemic and how it has brought about changes in the Indian education landscape with a close look at the recommendations that are aimed at bringing about revitalizing this modern way of education and as such bring down the levels of contemporary issues and challenges that the system faces as such in a general and a holistic perspective.

Keywords:Education, economy, development, pandemic and online learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

India known for a wide plethora of options in terms of education has solid footprints in the higher education map of the world. India is bestowed with many such institutions that have claimed global recognition and acclamation across disciplines. Many of the Indian institutes are permanent members of the world rankings and records. Amidst all the iconic achievements that India has in terms of the higher education, the quotient of employability

and retention of the nurtured talent in India poses a formidable challenge to her economy. Both internal and factors other than the above one way or the other deteriorates the achievements to dry and further to rust. One such factor that has fettered the Indian economy as such is the outbreak of the N-Corona Virus.

The Novel Corona virus was first identified in the Wuhan district of China in December 2019. The World Health Organization on the 10th of March 2020 has declared it as a global pandemic which spreads at a rapid pace and maintaining a social distance from gatherings and other areas where public sets foot in. As a measure to calm the super spread of this virus, the Government of India in cooperation with other governments in its land declared to put a lock to the entire nation by bringing in a nationwide standstill which can only bring down the effects of the spread. This brought in a serious setback to the economy globally and especially, India being the second to China in terms of such a great population base. It resulted in the closure of all sorts of educational institutions and with the statistics brought out by UNESCO it is estimated that,close to 1,268,164,088 (as on 5th May, 2020) learners have been impacted adversely due to closure of schools worldwide which constitutes 72.4% of the total learners enrolled. Considering the impetus of education in the holistic development of the youngest population that the world has UNESCO recommended learning through modes other than the conventional ones and such bring in novel methodologies in the teaching – learning pedagogy and thus came up the online mode that reached the learners rapidly and seamlessly with initial barriers and then soon crafted a way for itself as the new civilization of educational reform worldwide. An approximate status points that more than 166 nations worldwide has adopted the lockdown strategy that is aimed at cutting down the chains of the spread severely impacting nearly 87% of the learners worldwide and more than 60 million teachers and the ones in academic fraternity who confined themselves to teach from the brick and mortar settings of one's own residences.

Though many path breaking researches have spearheaded in various corners of the world till date after the wake of the pandemic, online applications and software continue to rule the teacher-learner sphere now. Applications such as Google Meet, CISCO WebEx, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom etc. have occupied the spaces where the traditional methods have created a hallmark for itself. Online learning has come up with a vision of boundless and borderless learning with no or less barriers to the knowledge seekers.

This paper attempts throw a beam of light to the impacts of the pandemic on the educational landscape by portraying the challenges that it goes through and to contemplate suggestive action plans and recommendations that can be devised in the way ahead in the mode of education that is modulating and molding the learners these days.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY
a) To understand the status of Indian Higher Education System.
b) To evaluate the issues and challenges to Indian Higher Education System.
c) To study the real-time impacts of Covid-19 pandemic on the practices and various methods involved in the day's teaching – learning methodology.
d) To ascertain the possible solutions to resolve the issues and collate workable and collective changes.
e) To provide suggestive recommendations for overall improvement.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research output is the outcome of an overview of studies conducted on the problems of Indian Higher Education System with a generic perspective and a kaleidoscopic view on the

pressing issues that the system faces with regard to the recent pandemic outbreak and the changes that it made. This is basically a qualitative research and follows the experiential approach. It uses secondary data for its analysis. Discussions with experts form part of the research work.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The study exhibits the structures existing in the Indian Higher Education Sector and their drawbacks. It attempts to narrate the problems in them and the challenges ahead. The study is concluded with recommendations for effective implementation considering the democratic nature of India and to bring the academic prosperity of our nation as a model to the rest of the world.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Though the study has a vivid outlook on the issues of Indian Higher Education System and provide feasible solutions, they should be carefully taken into consideration keeping in mind the following:

I.   The study covers a wider view of the Indian Higher Education System. It does not cover the intrinsic issues ofevery state of India and the evaluation is particularly based on the current scenario of the transition in the educational transactions.

II. The analysis is done based on secondary data available at various sources. It lacks primary data.

III. The researcher has not intended to compare Indian Higher Education System with that of other countries.

IV. The solutions are derived largely based on the public view and conclusions of other researchers and also upon the contemplation of opinions from subject experts and other academic professionals.

V.   The current study confines to the formal higher education setup and did not take into consideration the modes of higher education that are primarily acquired online or through blended learning and any other modes of learning.

VI. The study doesn't extend its reach to the ambit of Distance Education and that of Vocational Education.

The Context of the Indian Subcontinent

The face of the world's largest democracy sensed a greyish time since the country was struck by the crisis that put the entire globe into a drastic hashtag. As on date, India stands near the toll of nearly a lakh of active cases of the Covid-19 pandemic. The domains which always believed to sway by the breezes of boons soon was carried away by the storms of banes. Education being one of the domains that has more of stakeholders (beneficiaries) in the country was among one of the worst hit domains. The Central Government and the states alike have issued directives and imposed strict enforcement of the protocols that are to be adhered by all citizens of the nation. By the 16th of March 2020, the government at the Centre declared a temporary closure of all educational institutions in its territory without any deviation in terms of the tiers of education that respective institutes impart. Within a week or later, on 24th of March, the Government called in for a nationwide lockdown and since then all learning irrespective of the levels where brought online.

Higher Education in India: A Bird's Eye view

India has about 152 central universities, 316 state universities and 191 private universities. Other institutions include 33,623 colleges, including 1,800 exclusive women's colleges, and

12,748 institutions offering Diploma Courses. The University Grants Commission (UGC) coordinates, determines and maintains the standards of higher education at various levels. The bodies responsible for the different professional programs are: All India Council for Technical Education, Indian Council for Agriculture Research, Distance Education Bureau (erstwhile Distance Education Council), National Council for Teacher Education, Bar Council of India, Medical Council of India, Indian Nursing Council, Central Council of Homeopathy, Pharmacy Council of India, Central Council of Indian Medicine and Dentist Council of India, National Council for Hotel Management & Catering Technology etc., to name a few. Association of Indian Universities (AIU) forms a congregation of all Indian Universities which is headquartered in New Delhi. Few other agencies and forums that were constituted to upkeep and to prescribe quality standards in Higher Education includes, the National Testing Agency (NTA), National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) etc. are majorly brought under the ambit of the Ministry of Human Resource Development, MHRD (Currently, Ministry of Education), Government of India.

A Periscopic View on the Issues and Challenges of Indian Higher Education System
India, a nation known for its unique fabric of diversity shows immense diversity in terms of the education roadmap. The nation is proud to have implemented some of the best practices in this sector, yet the same nation soars in minute elements that the system needs and someway cripples in the global red carpets.The soaring issues are to be lessened and such the retention of the Indian institutes in the global pedestal should be a model for the world of education.
The poor show of our institutes in global ranking proves it a brickbat for our nation to shine in the global platform. The Times Higher Education Survey and Ranking, QS World Ranking are few global listings which our nation finds less representation and so the recognition is sadly dipping. The sad note of our institutes in the aforementioned global rankings should retain the brave image from the current pale image. Most of the regulators in systematizing the educational setup are confined to the national capital and its presence at the Centre alone cannot handle the issues and pressures which the system faces at a micro level. Regulators should ideally have a perspective that thinks globally and act locally which can be a primal consideration that addresses the pertinent issues and swift resolution may such be enacted.
The unthinkable and unregulated privatization of education through opening of many private self-financing institutes are a curse to the system which ultimately deteriorates the prescribed levels of quality in delivery. This aspect of decentralizing education to the private hands may be thought twice and such that the educationalists should be strictly monitored on the basis of a variety of yardsticks by which the quality of those institutes and the alma mater be ascertained. The fee structures are to be scientifically articulated when unplanned creates a gulf of divide among the students which in a big picture is one of the key issues. Affordability and access to all kinds of such education should be treated a basic right and the structuring of a fee range should be with the strict adherence of indicators that are more or less uniform for the whole of the nation or if subject to any exceptions, be noted with a significant evidence backing it that no one's basic right of getting access to quality education is denied.
Value Education is confined to institutes that are mostly run by the religious missionaries and other seems to be away from this realm. This should change and must bring in a rapid adaption among all institutes that impart education in India and to be aligned as an elementary criterion to get recognition, affiliation and participation in accreditation and ranking audits, reviews etc.Gone are those days which were ruled by chalk pieces and black

boards and the days have already come where technology plays in a key role in classrooms which are often not kept cognizant of. This entitles the need for keeping Technology-enabled Education at Par.The academicians still standing in the shoes of a teacher or a lecturer or sometimes the grave state of being a notes dictator.

Time have hurriedly come in where the academicians need to switch to the role of a facilitator who just facilitates the learning process and not just dictate the notes or run a slideshow. Changing into the new role will prompt the learners to think on their own, process independent results and portray individual glory in curricular and extra-curricular affairs.A student cannot only learn from the lectures or the prescribed notes, it is the environment that matters a lot. Most of the institutes doesn't have sufficient facilities that induces the learning process. More of institutes coming up with the same bunch of courses cannot be treated as boon if the wave of bane being lack of proper facilities. Providing the learners with a conducive environment should be the first and foremost agenda of any proceeding that is convened aimed at revitalizing the existing stature of education in this country. India, proudly hosts many learners from other developing and developed nations and this will exponentially go up only when the learning environment is envisioned as a basic necessity for the learner to achieve the desired levels of meritocracy.

A Curriculum or courseware must be designed in such a way that it can be digested by all student groups without any ambiguity and complexity to pursue the same. The curriculum should be periodically updated keeping in mind the recent advancements and developments in a particular field of study. This should definitely go beyond exceptions and that can bring the learners to be the forerunners to all developments that the world around is embarking on. The Indian Higher Education system though has gone through rapid and most modern adaptions the practices of assessment among the teachers and the learners' alike dates back to the olden days. Assessments are to scientifically go through a revision that takes into consideration the holistic perspective than confining itself to gauge one's academic abilities alone. One should take into account both the curricular and extra-curricular capabilities that catapults the learners of today to become the scholarly scions of our land tomorrow.

A scientifically articulated mechanism of reviewing and giving feedback has to be inculcated as a part of the system which eventually bring rapport between the teachers and learners and as such bring loyal and meritorious alma mater. A professional and scholarly attitude towards Inter-disciplinary, Multi-disciplinary and Trans-disciplinary academic outlook and that gives a sea change onto the current academic outlook of mastering a particular domain or trade and the rest is a different story. Our country and the learner population should empower to deface the age old proverb of 'Jack of all Trades, Master of Nothing' and to reorient the proverb to be a saying that worth appears and appeals to bring about Jack of all Trades and Master of Something and that sparkles in reality only if the system equates the outlook of inter-disciplinary, multi-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary academic thought process.

A Magnifier View to the Suggestive Recommendations that revives the current Higher Educational scenario and bring an Aspirational & Ambitious Young India

Education is one such domain in the world that owes rapid dimensions of change and transformation and such that the changes herein gets reflected at a faster pace and in a wider canvas. This necessitates the need for a magnifier view to the recommendations that are expected to transcend the existing framework into a better and aspirational brand.

Reengineering the focus of Education into Value Education that opens up to Cultural, Constitutional and Environmental Education which can be attained when all educational frameworks in the nation mandatorily include Value Education in their curriculums irrespective of the governance of the institution. This should open up avenues for the learners

to get familiarized with the cultures and traditions of India through Cultural Education and educating the learners on constitutional affairs which brings up a generation with accurate and ample civic sense and obedience. Environmental education should be envisaged so as the learners' responsibility to the planet is reminded every time they spot any mishaps that occur. This focus shall be continued in every realm of education despite the level of learners.

Revitalizing Education through deployment of ICT may optimally be put to practice of the teachers and learners alike. A situation has come now (the Covid-19 pandemic), where it dismantled the natural harmony and wellbeing of the mankind by bringing in a sunrise notion of driving education online or virtually real to the human eyes. This should only be applied after sufficient examination of the learner – facilitator readiness and the deployment of the most relevant tools available in the basket. The world has come to a serious point of distress where only proper hygiene practices can prove healthy to the mankind. In short, the world has come to full stop as a consequential impact of the outbreak and such that the educational institutes as well. WHO and the like, agencies of the United Nations Organization have come up with measures that will bring down the toll of spread and so with maintaining a healthy wellbeing. This does not exclusively stand to the pandemic period but also acts as a workable precaution that the world looks to see back safely.UNICEF and the like agencies under the UNO in association with global landmarks in mental health and neuro sciences specialism have devised mandatory programs that will not spoil the mental peace and to retain a balance during this distress. Such initiatives should be continued even after things get back to the normal scenario for the seekers to get adapted to another swift changeover. Such programs will help regain the emotional stability of the learners and thus contribute to the academic endeavors in the expected levels. Creation of an online ecosystem that comprises of parents, students, teachers and preferably, counsellors and psychologists will provide a conducive environment for all the stakeholders to interact at a common parlance and can bring about the unity within the classroom and in a bench and desk to a greater picture of reality.

All learners are not the same. Hence teachers should try to organize and deliver the academic content in a more personalized manner so as no learner is left behind or unattended. This can be a way that takes the pupil into a uniform manner of learning. All possible initiatives may be put to practice especially the mode of assessments that can be done through online quizzes and presentations/projects.

A model teacher should always automatically refine his or her teaching attitude and the much needed aptitude so as the learners will be compelled to have a learning and relearning curve all through their life.The academicians need to brush up with the recent trends, innovations and advancements by which they could transact effectively to the learners and rejoice their confidence thereby bringing the pride of academic prosperity and can be attained only by having regular Faculty Development Programs that helps to stand in-line with the changing trends and advancements in the pedagogical cycle. Conduction of Periodic Discussions, Reviews and Appraisal sessionscan be a timely and periodic conduction of such sessions that will throw the mic to each and every learner where all gets a chance to discuss, review and appraise any good practices and help to extend a feedback that can be a remedial aid to someone who is in need of a help and guidance.

Getting placed after a Course of Study will be the unwritten dream of any aspiring learner. Career Guidance and Placement Services with 100% Employability Quotient should be the catchword of any institute that offers academic programs. Every institution's regulatory sanction should be pre-approved with a guarantee for Career Guidance and 100% Employability Quotient during Placements which should be one of such salient features of any institution. This instills confidence and a focus onto one's careerist actions.Application of Research, Trade and Entrepreneurial Skill Credits to every Course is a permanent option that

needs a sudden inculcation and inclusion to pursue and pass out of the higher learning institute.

All courses should be integrated with an element of Skill Credits that puts one learner of a good researcher, tradesmen and an entrepreneur. Each and every student who graduate out of a course should formally hold credits in the aforesaid components which retains a sustainable base for our nation to be upon.Intake procedures are to be redefined ensuring the access to education without the barriers of the social debacles. This will ensure an unbiased and uncompromised educational outfit to a country which has the youngest population in the world. This will increase the supply of the learned population with respect to ever spiking demand of educated and qualified hands. Employment of Proven Human Capital will be the true energizer for the ever increasing demand and supply chains.

All educational institutions should man capable and proven human capital than just going by prescribed set of qualifications alone. A good teacher must inspire the learners in front of them and this will happen only if an amalgamation of skills put together are regarded as the yardsticks for academic recruitments and the same kept an eye on promotions, deputations and the like career hikes. Protection of the learners and all stakeholders in terms of data privacy and data security needs to be fostered and as such when hosting the lessons online and the learners participate in these activities shall not resort to compromise the aspects of data privacy and security. This can jointly be attained by educating the parents and the elders alike alongside the students on thus usage of digital tools. Blending the most appropriate approaches and limiting the number of applications based on availability, accessibility and security will retain the security of the data and the lessons transacted online.

SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The focus of this paper pertinently puts under the lenses of a microscope the paradigm shift in the pedagogical cycle which the Indian Higher Education system undergone with regard to the wake of the distress. It focuses on other primal considerations that are to be put in place to write-off the challenges that the system faced and to reach a destination where the nation stands proud with some really good models to the world of education to follow and imitate. This paper can thus form a firm base for some pioneering studies in the area and as such by assessed onto other levels or modes of education particularly with relevance to the current pandemic at a different geographical location. It may also as such be regarded as an attempt to cover the issues whatsoever is identified in the current situation and may further be slated to a study that takes into account the evidences obtained through primary data analysis,

3. CONCLUSION

In the midst of a massive outbreak and the rampant impacts worldwide, the fora of education has now come up with a new normal civilization of learning and that can be suitably called as Indoor Learning or In-house Education. When the world has faced several instances of a widespread pandemic the mankind didn't explore much of the potentials of learning within the four walls of one's home. Now, a time has come when people eventually realized and appreciated the mode of bridging the gap of their lost academic acme and to come up to the pinnacle of learning even from the verandahs and stairways of their home. As our former President Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam rightly quoted – 'Young People are Assets of the Nation' and it is upon each and every one of us to devise and engage a learning space for them and together bring our nation into the forefront. Education, no matter Primary, Matriculate or Higher be treated as the collective responsibility of all citizens of this nation anchored by

governments and other functionaries that India will start producing prodigies like we had in our past.

"The Struggle you're in Today is Developing the Strength you need for Tomorrow" – Anonymous

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