Right to Education during Covid-19 Pandemic: An Ordeal of Oraon Children from Jharkhand

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Abstract

Quality Education, the fourth Sustainable Development Goal has been a challenge for India, but the Covid-19 pandemic made it even more challenging by hitting hard at the most disadvantaged. Tribal children, who were already falling behind their peers because of limited or no access to education, became more vulnerable after the digitization of the education system. With this in mind, the study probes how this crisis influenced the education and mental health of Oraon children living in rural areas of Ranchi, Jharkhand. An exploratory research design has been adopted for the study. Focus group discussions and interviews were conducted thoroughly among Oraon students and their teachers. The Right to Education of these tribal children and their mental health were almost ignored during the pandemic. Sixty percent of these students experienced mental health issues like stress, anxiety, and depression because of the learning deficit. Their educational needs can be fulfilled by mitigating the digital divide and by implementing all related Acts and policies in their true spirit. Parents should listen empathetically to their children's thoughts, feelings, and emotions. This will improve their children's mental health and prohibit them from entering into Dhuku Systemat at this tender age in which couples go for live-in relationships mainly because of parental neglect, further pushing them to drop out of their education.

Keywords: Digital divide, Dhuku System, Learning deficit, Mental health, and Right to Education.

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Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic was a huge challenge to the world, especially for developing countries like India. It brought health crises, loss of lives, traumas, and economic shocks throughout the country. Precisely, Covid-19 has left short and medium-term impacts on almost everyone's life. Our education system was not an exception. Like other social systems, it also encountered sudden new challenges. Initially, the government announced school

closures for a month but then the period of closure was extended for an uncertain time. Schools, teachers, and students were suddenly asked to opt for online education. High-Income private schools could fully adopt online teaching methods but low-income private schools and government schools were almost on the verge of closure because of their student's inaccessibility to e-learning solutions. UNICEF (2021, October 19) According to a study by Oxfam India, the pandemic very badly affected government school students. During the lockdown, more than 80 percent of government school students from Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh have not received any learning material as digital devices and e-learning tools were out of their reach. Education became a luxury for many students, especially in underdeveloped regions or states. In this way, the Covid-19 pandemic increased inequalities among students.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought several children at risk of not getting a quality education, especially those who were living in remote rural areas or urban slums, children from extremely poor households or marginalized sections of society, disabled children, adolescent girls, and out-of-school children.

Oraon Community

According to the Census 2011, the Scheduled Tribes are traced in 30 States/Union Territories. There are 705 Scheduled Tribes in India. The total population of Scheduled Tribes in India is about 10, 45, 46,000 (that is 8.6% of the total population) of which 8,645,042 live in Jharkhand (that is 8.3% of the total Indian ST Population). The literacy rate of the Scheduled Tribes of Jharkhand is 57.1 %.

Table 1, Demographic Profile of the Oraon Tribe.

State	Number of households	Total Population			Sex ratio	Child sex ratio	Literacy (%)		
		Total	Male	Female			Total	Male	Female
Jharkhand	3,24,826	17,16,618	8,55,210	8,61,408	1007	967	67.0	75.9	58.1

Source: *Census 2011*

According to a folktale, the first parents of the Oraon were born out of the blood from the chest of a holy monk. Therefore, their descendants were called Uragaon Thakurs or Uraons. The most interesting fact is that generally, they do not use the term 'Oraon' in their language. Presumably, the name Oraon has been the exonym that was given to them by their Hindu neighbors. They were also called 'Raonaput' or the descendants of Ravana (Scheduled Castes & Scheduled Tribes Research and Training Institute Odisha, 2013). They are named 'Kurukh' after a traditional tribal king 'Kurukh' or a peasant lineage of 'Krishan' or 'Kurukha'. The community traces its origin to some places in Southern India from where they migrated to the Chhotnagpur plateau covering the border areas of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, West Bengal, Jharkhand, and, Bihar. For their livelihood, they depend on forests and farms. Sarhul, Karam, and Faguna are their main festivals.

While describing the community, V. Xaxa in 1992 wrote, "*By their language, they are identified as Dravidian like Telugus, Tamils, Kannads, etc. However, unlike them, the Oraons have remained "undeveloped" in that they have no script and literature of their own*".

Sujit Kumar Choudhary in 2016 wrote: During classical times, they managed to survive by selling forest products. Now a majority of the population can be seen in Northeastern states, where they are engaged in tea cultivation. This Indian tribal community is worldwide famous as it still believes in following the ancient tradition of human sacrifice. During the festival of Sarhul, which is celebrated before the cultivation of crops, these sacrifices are carried out to please their local deity. He further analyzes that government policies and programmes have contributed little towards improvement in their education.

Right to Education

Etymologically the term "Shiksha" is borrowed from Sanskrit, from the root verb शिक्ष् (*śikṣ*) which means to learn or to study. One of its earliest descriptions is mentioned in Taittiriya Upanishad-the mid 1st millennium BCE text, as follows:

ॐ꣡ꣳꣳꣿशिक्षाव्याख्यास्यामः ।
वर꣡ स्वरः
।मात्राबलम꣡ ।
साममसन्तषन ।इत्युक्तः ꣳꣳशिक्षाध्यायः
॥ १ ॥

Om! We will explain the Shiksha.
Sounds and accentuation, Quantity (of vowels) and the expression (of consonants), Balancing (Saman) and connection (of sounds), So much about the study of Shiksha. || 1 ||

— Taittiriya Upanishad 1.2, Shikshavalli, Translated by Paul Deussen (Wikipedia, n.d.).

Vidya, another Hindi word for education means correct knowledge. It has originated from the Sanskrit word "Vid" (विद्), which means to reason upon.

The word Education (noun) means child-rearing and it originated during the 1530s. It was derived from the Latin word educationem which means "*a rearing or training*". Since the 1610s it has been used for "*systematic schooling and training for work*" (Etimonline, n.d.).

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE) 2009 provides free and compulsory education to children of the age group 6-14 years. (Ministry of Education. (n.d.)

Background of the Act

Article 39 (f) and Article 45 of Directive Principles of State Policy as mentioned in Part IV of the Indian Constitution talk about giving opportunities and facilities to children to develop in a healthy manner and conditions of freedom and dignity and free and compulsory education to children respectively. Ramamurti Committee Report of 1990 was the first official document on the Right to Education. On 4th February 1993, the Supreme Court of India observed in the case of Unni Krishnan, J.P. & Others vs. State of Andhra Pradesh & Others by stating that "*The citizens of this country have a fundamental right to education. This right flows from Article 21. Its contents and parameters have to be determined in the light of Article 41* (*The State shall, within the limits of its economic capacity and development, make effective provision for securing the right to work, to education, and public assistance in cases of*

unemployment, old age, sickness, and disablement, and other cases of undeserved want) and Article 45 (*The State shall endeavour to provide, within ten years from the commencement of this Constitution, for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years*)". (Ministry of External Affairs.(n.d.) Tapas Majumdar Committee (1999) was set up, which encompassed insertion of Article 21A. In December 2002, the 86th amendment in Indian Constitution turned the "Right to Education" into Fundamental Rights (Article 21A). The 86th amendment provided for follow-up legislation for the Right to Education Bill 2008 and finally the Right to Education Act 2009. The Parliament gave timelines to the government to execute all its provisions in terms of infrastructure etc. till March 2013 and for regularizing and training all teachers till March 2015.

Salient Features of the Act

- It aims to give primary education to all children of the age group (6 to 14 years).
- It introduces Education as a Fundamental Right (Article 21A).
- The Act equips disadvantaged sections of society by providing 25% reservation in private schools.
- It allows being accepted to an age-appropriate class.
- For its implementation, Central and State Governments will share the financial responsibilities between them.
- It has norms regarding Student-Teacher Ratios, Infrastructure building, Working days of school, and Working hours of teachers.
- It talks about the qualifications for appointment as a teacher and the terms and conditions for teaching.
- It prohibits capitation fees, examining children for admission, denying admission, physical punishment and mental harassment, private tuition by government school teachers, and running of schools without a recognition certificate.
- It aims at developing a child-friendly system and child-centered learning.

Table 2, Status of Primary Education in Ranchi

		Performance Indicators (in percentage)	
Key Data	**Total**	Single-Classroom Schools	1.8
Total Schools (2016-17)	3,362	Single-Teacher Schools	19.6
Government Schools	2,411	Schools reachable in all weather	65.3
Private Schools	362	Schools having Playground	46.5
Madarsa&Unrecognised schools	589	Schools having Boundary wall	44.5
Teachers in Government Schools	7,611	Schools having Girls' Toilet	98.9
Teachers in Private Schools	4,267	Schools having Boys' Toilet	99.2
Teachers in Madarsas&Unrecog.	4,595	Schools having Drinking Water Facilities	96.7
		Schools providing MDM	97.9
		Schools having Electricity	33

Enrolment by mediums of instruction		Schools having Computer	21.1
Medium of Instruction	**Total**	Schools having Ramp	22.3
Hindi	318,240	Schools having Kitchen-shed	78.9
English	129,867	Schools with SMC	98.1
Urdu	9,733	Pupil-Teacher Ratio	28
Others	1,974	Student-Classroom Ratio	23
Bengali	9	Average Teachers per School	4.9
Total	**459,823**	Female Teachers	54.7
		Girls Enrolment	48.6

Source: *Elementary Education Report Card: 2016-17*

Ethical consideration

The respondents had the opportunity not to participate or to withdraw from the focus group discussion or interview at any time for any reason. The respondents were interviewed during their leisure time at their schools.

Data Collection and Analysis

Two government schools from villages having a greater ST population were randomly selected (One village from Namkum block and another village from Kanke block because these two blocks of Ranchi have the highest number of ST populations according to the Census 2011). Primary data were collected in November 2022 with the help of Focus group discussions and an interview schedule. Focus group discussions were conducted thoroughly among hundred Oraon students by dividing them into eight groups and interviews were conducted among ten teachers from these two schools. To understand the subject, four villages having Oraon population were visited, and to support the study, data were also collected from secondary sources.

Objectives of the Study

1. To know how they were learning before the pandemic.
2. To explore how they were learning during the pandemic.
3. To see how they are learning after the pandemic.
4. To probe whether they experienced a learning deficit during the pandemic.
5. To know whether that learning deficit affected their mental health.
6. To explore what were their coping strategies if their mental health was affected.

Learning Before the Pandemic

Quality education was a major challenge to Indian Government Schools even before the pandemic and even in the traditional classroom setting.

India's diverse society puts a great challenge before the state when it tries to fulfill the educational needs of its ethnic communities. Access to schools and enrolment rates are increasing but the dropout rates are alarming. Achievements are low in the case of these communities. One of the reasons behind this is they are not familiar with the language in which they are taught and the cultural context that is mentioned in their textbooks (MacKenzie, 2009).

K. Vupru in 2016 observed that the Act had a significantly positive impact on student's performance. But sadly very few Indian schools are compliant with all standards of the Act (only 10 percent, according to a study by Ambarish Rai in 2014).

The Act prescribes that the Pupil Teacher Ratio (PTR) should be 30:1 at the primary level and 35:1 at the upper primary level. Schools under this study were upgraded middle schools but both schools had only primary-level teachers. Even there was no part-time instructor for Art Education, Health and Physical Education, and Work Education for upper primary level students.

- **Government Upgraded Middle School, Bukaru Nagari, Block-Kanke, District-Ranchi**
  172 students were enrolled at the primary level (Class 1 to 5) and there were 7 primary teachers. The Pupil Teacher Ratio at the primary level was 25:1 and there was no teacher for the upper primary level (Class 6 to 8). The total enrollment at the upper primary level of the school was 118. The RTE Act, of 2009 says that for sixth class to eighth class, there shall be at least one teacher per class.

- **Government Upgraded Middle School, Gundu, Block- Namkum, District-Ranchi**
  98 students were enrolled in the school and there were only 3 primary-level teachers.

Inadequate teaching staff, teachers' absence from their workplace, poor condition of toilets, etc. have been the reasons why Indian government schools were lagging even before the pandemic.

Learning During the Pandemic

Only 21.1 percent of schools in Ranchi have computers (Source: Elementary Education Report Card: 2016-17). The majority of these tribal children do not have a smartphone. They including some of their teachers do not know how to use a computer or a smartphone. This made some of them technophobic and being technophobic they were more worried about this shift from traditional classroom teaching-learning to online education.

During the initial days of the lockdown, teachers were calling 5 to 10 students on a regular basis and they were also sharing learning content through WhatsApp but these contents were not reaching every child because of the digital divide. So they identified 3 to 4 zones having high enrollment near the school. Every Saturday they organized online quizzes keeping COVID-19 protocols in mind at these zones by dividing students into small groups. Each group had at least one or two students who had a smartphone. In this way, they tried to increase the accessibility to e-learning content and skill sets to work within a group among their students. But later on, when Covid-19 positive cases started rising, they were sent to different places to perform different duties like Floor Manager at the district hospital, Caller at the Covid-19 Control Room, Management of Railway Station/Airport/Medical Store, etc., and this time they left contacting their students.

Some students were taking private tuition while those who could not afford it were

taking the help of their elder siblings or other family members and some students whose parents were not serious about education were not studying at all. (World Bank, 2020)

Learning Deficit and Learning after the Pandemic

After staying away from school for a long time, these children forget their past learning (Kumar, 2021). The worst thing was that they were not getting a proper catch-up course. This was the reason why no one was confident to give examinations of the classes in which they were enrolled during the pandemic.

To minimize this learning gap and to put its students and teachers at some ease, the Jharkhand government declared to change its academic year for three years. The new academic year will start in July for the year 2022-23. There is a plan to reduce the extension by one month each year to restore it to its original form (April to March from the year 2025-26). For the year 2023-24, the new session will start in June whereas, for the year 2024-25, the new session will start in May (Source: The Avenue Mail, 2022).

The effectiveness of such initiatives by the state government can be seen after some time.

Learning Deficit and Mental Health

The magnitude of the impact of the pandemic on a minor's mental health can be calculated by vulnerability factors like developmental age, educational status, pre-existing mental health conditions, being economically underprivileged, or being quarantined due to infection or fear of infection (Singh et al., 2020).

The mental health of these tribal children was already at stake because of their tender age, poor economic conditions, alcoholic parents, etc. and this learning deficit further added a burden on their mental health.

They felt disappointed for lagging in education and also for missing school moments like playing cricket with friends, cultural activities, etc. This study found that out of the hundred children, the mental health of sixty children was affected because of the learning deficit. Out of sixty students, forty-two were stressed, fifteen were anxious, and three were depressed during the lockdown.

Coping strategies

In the case of these tribal children, their siblings, friends, and the Dhuku System helped them in coping. Children whose parents are alcoholics and children from poor households are opting Dhuku System because of neglect. This is a negative coping style and a major reason for dropping out in this tribal community. Adopting the system at this age finds its roots in poverty, alcoholism, and parental neglect. This problem arises from an interplay of different problems and gives birth to different problems like incomplete education, early motherhood, etc. hence creating a vicious cycle of poverty.

Conclusion

The pandemic questioned our traditional education system of classroom teaching. We are supposed to build a stronger and more equitable educational system by minimizing

the digital divide and by executing all related Acts and policies at the grassroots level. Also, there is a need for taking holistic

care of these children. Different interventions at different levels, but at the same time, can make a difference.

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