The Odd One is 'Out': Voices from Virtual Classrooms

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This article is a response to the online classrooms initiated from April 2020 onwards in schools across the country after the declaration of the lockdown. As classes went live in some parts of the country and several schools prepped towards the new medium, voices and experiences emerged from the field to throw light on the odds. The article collects the voices of students, educators and parents largely from the cities of Delhi and Bengaluru. The narratives are to be seen against the background of the critique of auto-modernism and emergent technology-intensive social institutions in the wake of COVID-19. This perspective pieces together the issues of infrastructure inadequacy in technology and the exclusiveness of pedagogy, and charts the inability of the marginalised sections in exercising the fundamental right to education. This article also highlights that internet classrooms are temporary make-shift arrangements.

As Anita attends calls in the office of an empty school, a voice in Kannada probed, "Madam, how are you planning to hold online classes?"

"Sir, we have purchased the software, you need a laptop, good internet connection and email id," Anita sounded like a pre-recorded IVR response in English.

"Madam I am not understanding what you are saying, we only have a phone at home, can

we use that? Can Gireesh come to school to attend classes?" He furthered enquired.

"Sir, if you do not have these things how will your child learn? These days everybody has a computer and internet at home, if you do not have, let him sit at home, there is nobody in school," she announced, ending the call.

Penny Gurstein (2001) critiqued the blurring realities between the home and the wired world by studying telework in 2001, and Donna Haraway warned us much before that in 1984 about the organismic mutation of human species and technology to become a "cyborg" who is "oppositional," "utopian," and "completely without innocence." The COVID-19 situation has helped us "zoom in" to the existing boundaries to which we were collectively oblivious. The mass exodus of the migrant workers from cities and the several lives lost on the way is further underlining those margins. As the lens further zooms into the lives of those outside the margins, it takes us to the newly evolved online classroom, which has transformed from table, benches and seats, to tablets, websites and applications. The technological reliance in the COVID-19 times has blurred the physical boundaries but highlighted the social and economic ones.

As classes went live in some parts of the country and several schools prepped towards the new medium, voices and experiences emerged from the field to throw light on the odds. The above-mentioned conversation between the office assistant and parent of an economically weaker section (EWS) student is from a private school in Bengaluru. The school is one among the thousands country-wide that are mandated by the state through the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (hereafter, the RTE Act) to grant 25% seats to students of economically weaker sections. While there has been open flouting and non-adherence, at the outset is the violation of Article 21A of the Constitution and the RTE Act, 2009.

Twelve-year-old Gireesh is only one among thousands of students in the EWS category studying in various schools across the country. While some schools are ensuring that all students are not left behind and have equal access to the classroom, the majority of the schools still have an avoidant and context-neutral response mechanism. The principal of a private school in Bengaluru shared that there are over 20 students who are from the EWS in her school and another 52 whose parents do not have an email address and are not even computer-literate. She added, "We have a directive from the school management and the parent–teacher association (PTA) to start online classes at the earliest and therefore my staff is working hard to prepare for the classes and finishing from where they left abruptly before the lockdown began. We, therefore, do not have time to train the parents or students, and merely creating email ids on their behalf will also not help the students. They will have to be trained in using the classroom software." The hurriedness to conduct online classes and the impending pressure on the school management and educators could be attributed to the fear of missing out and the need to occupy children while elders work from home. The pressure mounting from parent–teacher associations and aggressive marketing by

conference software brands regulate the live classrooms. Whilst, the EWS students and families bear the brunt, there are several voices that are a clear indication of the students from the group fearing large and irreversible learning gaps due to inaccessibility to the technology-intensive classes till the schools reopen.

Haraway's assertion is a reminder that technology does not create a level playing field but hurls the odd one out.

"Intensifications of hardship experienced world-wide in connection with the social relations of science and technology are severe. But what people are experiencing is not transparently clear, and we lack sufficiently subtle connections for collectively building effective theories of experience" (Haraway 2016: 173).

The Infrastructure

Johnson and Puplumpu (2008) have associated the Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological theory to assign a new system termed as techno-subsystem for defining the immediate system, which the latter described as the "microsystem." The techno-subsystem gives weightage to accessibility to computers, internet connection, telephone network, and lays down the relationship between internet-literate parents and children's effective engagement with the same. Subscribing to this assertion, it is evident that a child belonging to EWS might not have the well-equipped techno-subsystem and, hence, the knowledge to engage with the same.

Telecom Regulatory Authority of India's (2020) report of January 2020 depicts that only half of the population has access to a decent broadband internet connection. Further, the power distribution in the country acts as a significant barrier to technological access, and thus, a considerable percentage of school going students, whether in the EWS category or not, do not have the adequate infrastructure for accessing online classes. Satheesh V, a father of two children aged 14 and eight studying in a school in Bengaluru, shared, "There are two laptops in our homes, I need one for my coding assignments, and it is difficult for me to distribute the remaining one between my two children, they have simultaneous classes and during that period, the younger one is forced to access the classes through a smart phone which has lower resolution and audio quality. How can learning be facilitated in such a way? Thinking of this, I am worried about how my maid's child is accessing online classes in limited bandwidth on a mobile screen." Another parent, Deepak Sharma shared, "For ensuring easy access to classes online I had to order another laptop from Amazon, the older child accesses classes though a tablet in the meantime."

Shambhavi Sharma, a social worker at St Mary's School, Safdarjung Enclave, Delhi pointed out that there are nearly 100 students from EWS in the school, out of which 60 students come under the ambit of Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 and belong to various institutions. For these children, internet-based classes were nothing less than a nightmare till infrastructural glitches were fixed. "We have over 30 girls who live

with hundreds of other children in a shelter run by Aman Biradri, a Delhi-based NGO. The home is able to provide two laptops and three tablets and there was no wifi facility till the online classes commenced. Even after the laptops were facilitated, they were prioritised for students belonging to higher grades. There was intermittent logging off due to lower speed and to mitigate the same, the teachers would later send the recorded versions for self-learning by students." Shambhavi shared that the school had to first hold email training for the students and parents from the EWS before joining the internet classrooms. These are examples of responsible schools taking action in the positive direction to remove the barriers to learning and are standalone illustrations of best practices.

The Aesthetics of Visuality

Shambhavi further added, "On probing about the frequent logging off by the students during the classes, it was revealed that the students feel uncomfortable to disclose the modest living condition." The children of migrant workers are sharing a one-room space with more than four individuals in cities, in such scenarios, lighting and audio accessibility is compromised. The visual appeal of the background and the aesthetics of a webinar is a fine emergent catch for COVID-19 capitalism. Whilst the gaze and visuality is critical with respect to an online classroom, it brightens the class distinction. The need for an aesthetic and visually appealing background has become pertinent with classrooms reaching the bedrooms and the student's social background, which was to some extent blurred in the physical school space open to the gaze of a larger audience. As a result, the class consciousness is anticipated and manifested as intensified shame and embarrassment.

Pedagogy of the Virtual

Amit, an eight-year-old student from another school in Delhi raised another concern, "by the time I get the connectivity to log-in, Ma'am would have finished teaching, there is no way I can ask questions, sometimes teachers ask us to go mute else she will mute us. For days I could not understand anything, Ma'am would give worksheets which I had to recreate on my notebook because I do not have a printer to print the assignment sheets. Some assignments are about searching a topic on the internet but I do not know how to search, my father just learnt to use google from someone so that he can teach it to me."

While we trace the difficulty in accessing the internet and infrastructure with great difficulty when students enter the internet classroom, the struggle with decoding the audio instructions, assignments, notes, class instruction, evaluation and, in totality, deciphering the internet narrative has just begun. The virtual curriculum here is exclusive and content is such that it can be accessed only through the internet. It is difficult for students who are new to the web to understand, express the concepts and learn and upload the same for the teacher to evaluate, while the teacher here is also learning to devise assessment techniques virtually.

Shilpa Saxena, a biology teacher, shared that the online classes are about the sharing of

modules, and do not have much scope of discussion among students and the teacher. She shared, "in school one has ample time for building on the social capital, the recess and physical education and play time are crucial to a child's development." Learning empathy and coexistence are integral parts of education per se. The online classes are a seemingly cosmetic, makeshift arrangement to create an illusion of learning, which is unequivocally divorced from actual learning.

Context Neutral vs Context Aware

In the time of uncertainty prevails apathy and avoidance. A senior academic coordinator remarked, "We have not thought about the classes for the EWS students as yet, let us focus on the ones who pay, because they are comfortable using internet, later on we will provide remedial classes to those students when school reopens, as such they are not top performing students and have considerable learning gaps, what they will be missing out is not much." Alongside the avoidant attitude, there is a mindset of "remediation" or the damage-control approach to bridge that gap which again beats the purpose of inclusion.

The submission here, with regard to exclusion, is the belief that economically backward families are unable to support the children and education is not their priority. On the contrary, the schools are unable to prioritise or emphasise the learning for the children from the EWS. The avoidant context-neutral approach rather affirms the "culture of poverty" where educators and others falsely believe that poor families do not value education, or children from poor families will never understand technology or falsely believe that technology is an equaliser. Aparajita Sharma who is with the Council for Social Development, engages with the RTE, and expresses the apprehensions about the classroom transformation, "The approach online classes follow meets the goals of tuition cosmetically, and tuition cannot be a substitute for classroom learning or education per se, the goal of classrooms whether in physical space or through wire should be access, equity and inclusion and not a temporary arrangement like online classes that can only widen the learning gaps."

The voices are distinct but they align with the thought that internet access and classrooms are temporary makeshift arrangements and conceal the learning gaps caused by unprecedented conduct of online classes from March 2020 onwards. Most importantly, the violation of the right to equitable education is evident here. The internet, as anticipated, is not an equaliser but rather hardens the existing margins and excludes the "odd one out." It is premature to imagine the wired space as an alternative to schooling. In the wake of COVID-19 and abrupt closing of schools, we had already begun to advocate home deschooling. Nevertheless, it is not only unjust to ascribe much importance to this metamorphosis, but also Kafkaesque.

Conclusions

With exacerbated disparities in accessing digital tools, internet connectivity, and infrastructure in India, some of the alternative strategies explored by not-for-profit

organisations and educational institutions are examples of best practices or at least a way forward. While homeschooling was advocated and practiced during the pandemic, the absence of the physical teacher, the process of remediation, mentoring, and evaluation was also discussed in this context.

According to Chadha (2020), only 64% of the urban population and 20% of the rural population can operate a computer, and 73% of the urban population and 25% of the rural population know how to use the internet. This indicates a digital divide not only in rural locales but also in urban areas. A University of Hyderabad study with 2,500 students suggests that though 90% of students have mobile phones, 63% can attend virtual classes regularly (TNN 2020; Uzair and Khanam 2018). Here, online learning is interrupted due to a lack of internet connectivity, the high cost of online classrooms, and the intermittent power supply. An ASER report shows that 43% of the children in government schools in Karnataka did not have access to devices and 63% received learning material through WhatsApp (*Hindu* 2020).

To bridge the learning gap, organisations such as Pratham came up with an energy-efficient PraDigi tablet, uploaded with ample concepts on numbers and words. These were distributed to the most marginalised students after training parents and resource persons from the community. Besides enhancing the book supply chain, Room to Read focused on strengthening community resources such as panchayats, student management committees (SMCs), parent bodies, Anganwadis, and ASHA workers to ensure the continuation of the learning gap. Community-level libraries and reading clusters can monitor students' progress at the micro-level in physical modality.

The emergent state policies and intervention focused on facilitating e-learning platforms through DIKSHA, a programme envisaged by the erstwhile Ministry of Human Resource Development that facilitates electronic content. It aims to cover student populations from low-cost schools that cannot access virtual classrooms. Programmes such as DIKSHA, SWAYAM, and E-pathshala aim to reach the marginalised student population. SWAYAMPRABHA specifically operates using the television through direct-to-home (DTH) channels. DIKSHA has enabled digital content in 18 languages. Additionally, the Energised Textbook program under DIKSHA has given coverage to 35 state/UT's education departments and CBSE and NCERT are using the energised textbook solution (MHRD 2020). A total of 60 crore copies of 1,900 energised curriculum textbooks are printed and distributed across the nation. Over 90,000 pieces of digital content are curated and accessible via QR codes in these energised textbooks.

The NCERT has designed the curriculum and content for such platforms to ensure the learning gap is bridged. In the absence of a regular academic calendar to monitor development, the NCERT's alternative calendar to self-monitor the numeric and verbal conceptual understanding and development could be used as a benchmark. The practice

adopted by schools such as St Mary's School, Safdarjung Enclave, Delhi, and several others could be employed where students visit in small clusters for remediation in physical mode. It could also address the diverse learning patterns of the students.

The low-frequency community radio with wide accessibility and less infrastructural requirements could be utilised. It is not only indigenous, localised, and energy-efficient but also can ensure equitable coverage of educational content in vernacular languages.

A hybrid or blended model which has begun to take shape in several institutions will steer the slow and steady movement to the conventional learning calendar.

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