"Some Online Questions"

A teacher at one of the colleges in Delhi University had been told to take online classes during the current lockdown. Since he was stuck in his native village which has no broadband connection, he was forced to rely on a mobile hot spot to connect to Zoom for his lectures. The problem was that there was only one location in the house, a spot in the backyard next to the cattleshed, where there was reasonable mobile connectivity. So he would conduct his classes from his backyard- until the day the transformer in his village conked off and there was no electricity for three days.

In these unusual times, when nouns like "Zoom" have morphed into verbs and "Online teaching and Assessment" seems to be the flavor of the month with education bureaucrats, it is important to realize the implications of this radical shift. There are significant issues- technological, social and pedagogical- which need to be thought through before we jump onto this bandwagon.

Technological first- the University of Hyderabad carried out an in-house survey with about 2500 students on issues related to online mode of teaching. The results are sobering- though 90% of the respondents have a mobile phone, about 63% of could only access online classes infrequently or not at all. Interestingly, among the concerns raised about online instruction, 40% reported unreliable connectivity as being a major deterrent while 30% cited the cost of data. Significantly, 10% of the students reported uncertain electricity supply as a concern.

These numbers are not specific to a particular institution- our own experience at the University of Delhi has been very similar. Our students have shared with us similar concerns regarding online mode of instruction. And these are students from two of the premier institutions in the country- the situation of students in hundreds of state universities and thousands of colleges could at best be similar or indeed worse. Indeed, the Niti Aayog, in its "Strategy for New India @75" report, highlighted quality and reliability of the internet as a major bottleneck. It went on to point out that 55000 villages in the country are without any mobile network coverage.

The technological issues are of course interrelated with social issues. In the last 2 decades, there has been a conscious effort on the part of the state to improve access to education at all levels. From the Right to Education Act to OBC Reservation to the more recent EWS reservation- we have seen a concerted effort to bring marginalized sections of our society into the ambit of state funded education. And this is reflected in the student demographics.

In a survey of 400 students at Delhi University in 2017, we found that about 35% lived in villages. The economic and educational backgrounds of the students was significant- more than 75% of them reported a family income of less than 5 lakhs per annum while more than 40% of them had parents with less than High School education, making them the first generation of college goers. Our experience is that the numbers in recent years are similar or even worse. And it is important to note that these are for Delhi University and not some *moffusil* college or state university.

Given the socio-economic milieu from which our students are coming into higher education, these challenges are important to factor into education policies. And they segue into pedagogical issues - a large number of students are not comfortable with spoken or written English. This makes online pedagogical material that much inaccessible. In face-to-face teaching, these factors are mitigated to an extent by the use of bilingual mode of communication which incidentally we have been using for several years now. Furthermore, the students come with very different levels of prior training which makes it difficult to have a one-size-fits-all approach which online teaching assumes.

The current situation is of course an unprecedented one. However, we should be careful of advocating inappropriate, inegalitarian and discriminatory strategies to deal with it. The issue is not of a few weeks of online teaching and online exams. The real question is whether we are letting in the proverbial nose of the camel into the tent. Once it is there, there is no stopping the beast from taking over. Reduced commitment of the state to investment in public education and promotion of the online model instead might just be the logical result. Or maybe, that is what our education planners really want?

April 27th, 2020