

A drastic rethink of primary education is needed in the post pandemic world

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The Covid-19 pandemic has devastated livelihoods across the country. For the crores of people living in rural India, it is a triple whammy. The income on which our people live week to week and in many cases day to day, has vaporised be it the small and marginal farmer, the landless labourer, the potter or the carpenter. In the huge reverse migration of workers from cities to their villages, those who were supporting their families have instead become dependants in their own homes. This contraction of rural incomes will have a significant effect on the landscape of school education in the months and years to come.

In the past fifteen years, school education in India witnessed a massive migration of children from public to private schools. What began in cities spread to mofussil areas, as private schools mushroomed. Fifteen years ago, only 25 percent of children were in private schools, by 2018 this had risen to 38 percent. Numbers tell only half the story. This movement has been both educationally and socially flawed. For government schools are as good or even better than these private schools on basic learning parameters, while also trying to serve the broader goals of education. And in an already fragile social structure, the private school had become a status symbol while the government school became the place for the most disadvantaged children of our country. People earning just around 7500 a month, imposed hardships upon themselves, spending 12 to 15 percent of their meagre income, to enrol their sons in private schools, even if they be of dubious quality. The daughters continue in government schools.

BACK TO SCHOOL



GOING PUBLIC : The Covid-19 pandemic will see a shift in rural schools, with more parents moving their children from private educational institutions to government schools.

Now in these Covid-19 times, what will happen to the lakhs of children enrolled in private schools after the pandemic has shattered the livelihoods of their parents? In this dire situation it is unlikely that parents will be able to afford the fees of even low-cost schools in small towns. It seems inevitable, that over the next couple of years, India will see a significant reverse migration of children from private schools to government schools. In cities, the well-meaning, well-to-do citizens may subsidize and sponsor the education of the children of their domestic help and drivers, but in the small towns and villages of India where people fend for themselves, let us be prepared for this significant social reorganization. A redeeming fact is that studies such as the ASER Survey and Azim Premji Foundation's study in the last couple of years – much before Covid-19 – had begun to show that the migration to private schools was plateauing and in a number of places, discerning parents had begun moving their children back to good government schools.

If indeed, a significant number of children come

back to government schools, it will be a shot in the arm to the trend of the past 2 years of parents switching to government schools from private schools. Government schools (in India private schools have the misleading appendage calling themselves public schools) because only they are able to serve everyone, everywhere, especially the most disadvantaged in the most deprived areas. When schools reopen it will be a time of both opportunity and responsibility for our government schools.

As the state education departments come up with guidelines on how schools should be conducted during these Covid times, teachers will have to embrace major change. They will need all the encouragement and support of the education departments' academic and administrative functionaries as they adapt to these new challenges. The way classes, games, morning assembly or even alternate day attendance to ensure social distancing for students are planned, will be a completely new experience for all. Curriculum and syllabus will also have to undergo change. Right now

in the field, there are thousands of remarkable government school teachers and principals, who unmindful of their personal safety, are going to their communities to create awareness about the precautions and good practices to avoid infection. When schools reopen, one expects these will be the people who will also lead the way in which their schools will adapt and function.

If schools implement alternate-day attendance for children (to ensure physical distancing) it might also open a path to newer classroom processes and perhaps less of the multi-grade teaching on any given day. The syllabus may get reduced but that could well liberate the teacher, who has been straining so far under the pressure of 'topics must be completed'. It will be an opportunity for the teacher to exercise greater autonomy and innovation. One of the outstanding head teachers I met in the course of my study was Ramesh Kumar in Meethan village of Sirohi district. Even during those normal times, he insisted, 'To hell with the syllabus, let us provide sound fundamentals to the children'. Surely school heads like Ramesh will embrace this opportunity to design the students' learning in the way he imagines. The mid-day meal, so important for our children will assume even greater importance. In my visits to rural schools I would often see that for 30 to 40 percent of the children, it is the only hot meal of the day. In the hard times upon us, the importance of the midday meal will be even higher. This is just a brief sketch of some scenarios to show how government schools will function during the Covid-19 times.

As school reopen, it will be the time when government schools can show how important they are for the nation. For the future of our children and for realising the vision of a society that is envisioned in our constitution.

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SUNDAY BEST