

Dissolving boundaries through Digital Mediation during the Pandemic: Study on changing role of Parents

Anshu Singh

*Research Associate, Centre for Women's Development Studies, Delhi, India dakforanshu@gmail.com
Corresponding Author* Anshu Singh*

ABSTRACT: The Covid-19 pandemic underscored the adaptation of digital media as the singular solution to ensure continuity of schooling, learning and connectivity amongst children alongwith adults. Accepting digital media has been difficult for new parents. Children inevitably are driven towards technology during the pandemic. It may be for learning and/or entertainment. While parents had a difficult time managing the screen time for children before, now it is impossible to reduce. The pandemic has hence brought new learning that allows parents and children to live together with digital intervention. Through online interviews with twenty-five parents of school going children in India, this paper maps out the aforementioned behavioural change regarding the relationship between digital media and children. Mixed methodology research was deployed bringing qualitative and quantitative tools. The findings of the research revealed that while pandemic blurred the spatial and time distinction for people as parents, teachers, employees and professionals, the digitally disrupted environment also led to new learnings for both the parent and children community with its many ongoing challenges. This study holds much relevance in the current times to draw out the nuances of the struggle that the older cohort is undergoing to adapt to the increasingly symbiotic methodology with global implications.

KEYWORDS: *COVID-19, lockdown, Delhi-India, Parents, Children, Learning, Online-Schooling.*

1. Introduction

The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on India was realized through a State response in March of the year 2020. The entire country was forced to go under an absolute lockdown, allowing only essential services to function. The lockdown was sudden but acceptable given the absence of knowledge about the new disease and the in-adequate medical preparedness for a large population of 1.380 billion people in the country (Worldometer 2020). The restrictions on people were meant to give time to establish the necessary infrastructure and gather resources to deal with the pandemic. The lock down was a way to decrease movement of people and hence check the spread of the virus and the consequential infectious population.

The lockdown was successful in a way because “mobility in grocery and pharmacy, recreation and retail, transit to station visits to parks, and workplaces reduced by 64.2%, -70.51%, -65.6%, -46.17 and -60.03% respectively” (Ghosh et al 2020). During the four phases of varying degrees of lockdown restrictions, state and central government tried to utilise the strategy of social

distancing to decrease the number of cases in the country (Channel 2020). Lockdown has been found out to have been effective in some areas (Gupta et al, 2020; Lancet, 2020; Sardar et al, 2020) but still lacking in effective plan to contain the novel virus. The lockdown however started a domino effect to deprive the vulnerable groups of necessities.

The lockdown though was able to curtail human movement in certain pockets, it also started a mass migration due to lack of social support, loss of jobs, hunger and impending fear of hunger (Ghosh et al, 2020; Kakkar and Nundy 2020). The migrants were mostly working class people, with their families, who earn daily wages for sustenance. Their means of earning was lost due to the harsh lockdown but expenditure in form of monthly rent, food supplies and others continued. Without any state provisions, the poor were left to fend for themselves for which they decided to leave the cities (Srivastava, 2020; Sengupta et al, 2020; Mukhra et al 2020). Within the impoverished who were fleeing for their villages, children and women were the most affected by various means (Azeez et al 2020).

The mass exodus brought concerns of spike in the cases of infection (Bhagat et al 2020). The deliberations around the migration crisis and increasing rate of infection in the nation also brought to fore the already abysmal conditions of health infrastructure in the country (Lancet 2020). In addition it refocused the attention on the absence of social-security provisions for the poor in India (Dutta and Fischer 2021). Only after a long deliberation state and central government decided to deliver free ration to the vulnerable sections of the society. There was also an attempt to revive community kitchens for people who were not able to earn daily wages for sustenance.

The medical infrastructure however was under tremendous pressure. The low rates of testing, reporting and isolating stood witness to the lack of policy perspective in the COVID management (Al-Dahdah et al, 2020). Indian government was also blamed to mis report the number of total cases and deaths (Chatterjee, 2020; Ghosh, 2020). Apart from the medical system the under preparedness of the government has impacted the economy adversely. Research around the COVID crisis suggests that the disease has taken toll on the jobs and related economic activities, for instance - profit, promotions, appraisals and others. The reduced flow of money in the market reflected on the reduced power of buying along with dip in cash and other forms of transactions.

Restrictions on movement due to the lockdown started an economic fall out that effected the fiscal health of the country in a significant manner (Balajee et al 2020). Crowd intensive industries like tourism, aviation, retail, and others were severely impacted (Chaudhary et al, 2020). The power sector also faced a steady decrease in demand (Kanitkar, 2020). The rural economy sector however has seen a impactful increase (Dev and Sengupta, 2020). It, however is a small section that is opposite to the general experience of COVID by the public. In this wider context of loss, death and dread the question of education is located in the basics of inequality and new forms of in access. The pandemic effected everyone but it pushed vulnerable sections of the society to reconsider the decision of sending their children to school. When the schools were closed a large section of the society was not able to join the online revolution of education due to lack of resources.

1.1 Covid-19 disruption

The COVID 19 virus has disrupted human lives like never. In the March of 2020 people experienced a sudden ceasing of their everyday lives due to a country wide lockdown in India. The normal routine of going to early morning walk, getting milk, getting ready for office or helping children to go to school, everything needed reconsideration. For parents this time was especially demanding. The demarcation of personal space and life from that of work was diminished. They were now parents, spouse, employee, a friend and children to their own parents within the same space.

The lockdown and the continuing schooling from home has taken a significant toll on the mental health of parents (Fontanesi et al, 2020; Patrick et al, 2020 ; Wu et al, 2020). Reports by journalists and researchers point towards an increased pressure caused due to juggling home, office and school at the same time (Cheng et al, 2021). The studies also note a gender dimension of the lockdown, where females reported increase in their workload due to reasons such as absence of house helps, expectations of the family members, dependency of children on mother more than any other member of the family amongst others (Ali and Feroz, 2020; Collins et al, 2021; Cameron et al, 2020; Gulia et al, 2020; Russell et al, 2020; Thapa et at, 2020; Topalidau et al, 2020).

The pandemic is forcing people to reevaluate the care economy within families (Stokes and Patterson,2020; Rodrigues et al, 2021; Thomason and Macias-Alonso, 2020).The idea and contours of what belonging to a home meant underwent a change since the spatial and time distinction between home being sacrosanct from out of home activities such as work and school blurred. With direct engagement in the lives of children and their routine, the parents were found to re-centering their focus on to the child as a care giver not nearly a provider. In the nuclear families care giving was re-discovered to satiate the needs of long distance living (Duong and Karlawish, 2020). Research also has suggested that people evaluated change in inter personal relationships (Okabe-Miyamoto et al, 2021). By force or otherwise people were involved in the lives of the others. Learning emerged as a form of care. New dishes, games, technologies to help children and the like became significant defining features of the everyday lives of people stuck in the pandemic life.

Without anything to do or cook or play, parents were lost in the home with children. There was an urgent need to update themselves with new knowledge about various things. With compulsory hands-on engagement in children's education, due to online classes, parents have had to acquire an active role in learning activities. Teachers were not present physically to help students with movements, activities, or concepts. The parents at home have to acquire this role. It especially stands true for the logistics of online learning. For men and women with prior knowledge of computers and meeting applications, this was a slight convenience in comparison to those who were dependent completely on schools to teach their children (Abuhammad, 2020; Bhamani et al, 2020; Dong et al, 2020; Garbe et al 2020). The new-found need of laptops, personal mobiles, wi-fi connections and private space for attending online classes was hard for several parents (Afridi et al, 2020; Tiberwala, 2020).

Online classrooms in India are impersonal spaces. In the context of density of urban dwellings that hardly provide privacy to anyone, it is difficult to miss several electronic devices in one or

two rooms with content overlapping and unprompted sharing of content. The 2011 census notes that thirty-seven percent of the total household dwellings in India is only single room. Thirty-one percent of the total population have two-room dwellings for the whole family. For a family of four point four per household (ESRI, 2020) the dwelling situation does not promise any privacy or even convenience of attendance without distraction (Martin et al , 2020). The situation is alarming even as it is, the rise of domestic violence during the pandemic makes it worse. Global trends have shown significant increase in the cases of domestic violence against women (Chamorro-Premuzic and Wittenberg-Cox, 2021; Miltimore, 2020). In India researchers have reported a one-thirty one percent increase in the reported cases of household abuse during the lockdown period (Bradbury-Jones and Isham, 2020; Ravindran and Shah, 2021). The increase of the domestic abuse was also found to be directly related to the strict(ness) of the lockdown.

Current research is a contribution to understand the situation of online schooling in an Indian household in the given context. It is a descriptive research that brings forth the experiences of the respondents through their own voices. The authors have focused on the questions of new learnings and challenges of online classrooms with the respondents selected from middle to low economic background in Delhi, India. The research will add to the current knowledge of people's experience of pandemic through analysis based on narratives. The data presented in the paper is translated from Hindi and the names used are pseudonyms.

2. Methodology

The pandemic has brought forth new challenges for qualitative researchers. The fieldwork has changed its dimensions and locations. For this study, the authors defined the research field as the internet and telephones through random sampling. All the parents were contacted with reference of a private school in the South West Delhi, India. The school provided the authors with the details of all parents of class nine. In a randomly devised sampling method, the author called every second phone number with the interview schedule about online classes of their children. For every parent who refused, the authors contacted the next one on the list. A total of twenty-five parents were contacted. Each interview consisted of two stages. First one was to attain information about the sample and second one insisted on talking about the experience of the lockdown.

A detailed profile was created of every parent that included information about the size of the house hold, role and position of the respondent in the family, age of the respondent, number of children and other members in the home, annual income of the family, number of rooms in the house, educational status of the respondent, role of the respondent in the education of the child, number of communication gadgets like mobile phones, laptops and desktops at home. There was another set questions about their reactions towards the lockdown, schooling during this time, general perception of family life and digital learning since March. Respondents were asked to answer this set of questions in a subjective manner by giving examples from their experiences. Each respondent was asked to speak in the language they were comfortable in.

2.1 Sample Description

Seventeen of the total respondents were female, rest were male. All the respondents belonged to single earning member families. All the mothers were house makers. Average age of the respondents was forty one years. The average income of all the families was forty eight thousand Indian rupees per month. The respondents do not label themselves as poor but agree to struggle financially. We have not used the classification of ‘middle-class’ or ‘lower middle-class’ here because the pandemic had an inevitable impact on the class status of the families including their spending potential along with changing the concept of necessities. of the respondents were noted to have lived in their own homes in Delhi. Fifteen of the families were living in a nuclear setup, the rest others were living in extended families with more than five members. Nineteen of the families were three children families, the rest had only two children. Twelve of the respondents were just literate, six others were high school graduates, three had a professional certification and four were college graduates. All interviews were conducted in Hindi which was then translated to English for the analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

Broadly, the interview schedule was designed to allow the respondents to talk about their experience of the online classes of the children. All the responses were coded in an excel sheet according to the question numbers. The objective answers were quantified. All the subjective responses were entered and divided on the basis of the themes that they were representing.

3.1 Establishing virtual schools at home

In an exceptional avatar of Baumaun’s liquid modernity, the structures of schools flowed into every house during the COVID19 pandemic through technology (2000). With the decision to close schools and other educational institutions till further notice, every household is now divided into various sections of academic rigour at different times. As Sudeep, a 40-year-old parent of one daughter, informs,

“Our one home is school in the morning, then is a tuition class in the afternoon. My daughter also takes extra classes of English, then she sits with Youtube to clarify her doubts and then she sits for group study. Her music coach insists on taking lessons at eight o clock in the night, which she does. So, my house is now everything. She does not move but is everywhere.”

On one hand for Sudeep it is assuring to see his daughter doing all the things without going out and being in the way of any harm. But it also means that he has to spend a considerable amount of money in establishing a system where his daughter is able to do everything without any hardship.

“We bought her a phone, then we installed a wi-fi system at our home. She also now has her own table and chair, that is her academic space within the house. After sometime, I realized that it is difficult for her to study on the phone so I bought her a laptop. She now owns more electronic gadgets than I do. I am happy that she is learning everything, but I am also concerned about her health.”

Sudeep was able to spend money on giving his daughter adequate gadgets for studies during pandemic, but there were other parents who were not able to afford all the things required for the schooling of children at home. Maya, 39-year-old mother of three children noted,

“One of my daughters is going to college, this is her first year. My other daughter is in eleventh class and a son in fifth. I cannot sit with anyone in the any class. That is because my education was different from them. But we live in a two- room flat, we surely cannot give them personal space for attending classes. Then there is the whole paraphernalia- the phones, the internet. It was so difficult. We gave two of them old phones that we were not using. My son uses my phone for his classes.”

She further informs, *“It was getting difficult for all of them to attend classes and do their homework online. So we requested a neighbour to accommodate one of the children during school time. Thanks to them house is manageable now. But it seems that the whole pandemic was there to make us realize that we do not have big enough home.”*

Seventy two percent of the respondents agree that their homes were not big enough to allow private spaces for the children for their respective classes. It was difficult for them to manage during the lockdown. Either each child was listening through the head phones or have to remove themselves from the room when other class was going. It was especially difficult for small children who were struggling with over-sized earphones and un-interactive pedagogy. Yogita, a 37-year-old mother of two children note,

“My little one is second class. She is not able to sit all day to take the class. It is impossible for her to wear earphones. So she just sits listening to her teacher at a low volume to not disturb her brother who is in ninth class. His is an important class. He will go to tenth class next year. I however feel bad for my daughter, she is stuck with the whole thing. But she explores a lot, now she is learning more poems online than her teacher can ever teach her.”

The respondents are struggling with the lack of institutional structures to support the learning of their children. The major concerns have been space for the children to attend classes along with the devices to do so. The acquiring of the digital modes to help with the classes is an extensive investment that concerns the respondents (Afridi et al, 2020; Tiberwala, 2020). Shared spaces and devices are the only ways to help the children, of the respondents, to continue their education in the times of the pandemic. Overlapping is a way that the educational structures have become liquid during the last few months for the students and their parents.

There is excess of educational practices taking place online thorough numerous sources. School, hence, has ceased to be the only place to get education or clarification about formal system of examinations and scoring.

3.2 Learning of new technologies by Parents

When students go online for their education, they pull their parents alongside with their questions and needs. The pandemic has created a social environment of learning, where children’s need are

motivating parents to take up a role similar to facilitators in school. As part of the questionnaires the respondents were asked to talk about the challenges they have faced due to online schooling. The discussion on the challenges however turned out to be a constructive discussion on the new things that parents have to learn to help their children.

Mona, a 29 year old mother of a boy notes, “...*When my child goes to class on the mobile, I stay with him. He depends on me for many things now. If his teacher asks him to pick up a colour from the stack, he needs me to put all the colours in front of him to at least have an option of choosing.*” She goes on to describe her role as a parent in the online classroom, “*I have to spend sometime with him now. Not just for his homework but also for his classroom teaching. I need to help him to understand and learn the poems. The actions too, I learn from his teacher to make him practice for the recital or test. Then there is the mere effort of trying to make him sit through the class. How to do that? I don’t understand how do they do it in school. Kids this age do not sit. For my child, the teacher on phone is just another video, boring video at that because other channels online have the same content in a much more interesting format.*”

According to Mona the struggle to just create a user relation with online classes is difficult. Her child struggles to differentiate between other videos and his formal schools. The formality of the school is unappealing to him. Role of his mother, in the formal structure, increases manifold. She is needed to interpret everything that the teacher is saying or instructing. For the other videos on the web he is easily engaged without any help. It is pertinent to engage the senses of a young child in everyday for his/her schooling. In the online medium where the engagement is limited, it is pertinent for parents to take up the responsibility of sensory engagement that otherwise was or school.

Ayesha, a 34 year old mother of two children notes, “*My elder child is in fifth class and the second one is in first. Both of them have different engagements online. The younger one needs more attention. I have to sit with him to make sure she is listening to whatever the teacher is saying. Also, she is still learning to write, so it is difficult for her to note down everything. There is a significant oral element in her learning. Where she needs to submit videos of the poems and stories. I needed to learn a lot of things for her online classes. I was finding poems for her to recite, then making her dresses to suit the poem. I did not know to record a video before this but now I have to make them to send to the teacher for evaluation. The whole thing takes a lot of planning, designing and execution.*”

She further notes, “*For the elder one, the whole thing require a different skill set. She works all day on her homework. I sit with her too. I also check the whole thing before making it into a PDF file. I still do not know what PDF is but I know how to make it because I am doing it for my daughter. She talks about downloading documents in to the team folder, then she get confused of what all has she downloaded. In normal time I would be arranging her books, packing her bags according to the time-table. Now I am just struggling with file downloaded in the computer. I have to learn to organize them then teach it to my daughter, otherwise she will be lost in the download folder.*”

A significant amount of learning by parents during the lockdown originates from the domain of computers and internet. As background of the respondents note, a lot of them are not computer literate. However the demands of the online schooling have provided them with opportunity to learn that the parents are making efforts to get up to date about the advancements in technology to assist children in their education.

Rakhi, a 41-year-old mother of three children, has been working from home since March of the year 2020. She is employed as a teacher in a local private school. She takes her classes online throughout the lockdown. She notes,

“The school asked us to take online classes. I had no idea what it actually is till that time. There was a lot of work involved in the whole thing. I was asked to purchase a laptop. I could not afford that so I settled for a board and a mobile rest that will keep my mobile still when I take classes. It helped my children a lot. I understood the way teachers are teaching. I also were able to help them in technical parts of their assignments and homework. I could not help but notice the increased amount of work that I am doing in the time.”

She further adds, *“I wake up in the morning, get the kids ready, cook breakfast and lunch, help them set their phones for class, take my class, help them in between if they ask, then their is my husband, he also needs breakfast before his office starts (at home). When I went school, those seven hours I was to myself, dedicated to my job. Now I am a mother and a teacher at the same time. I don’t know when responsibilities of one end and the other starts. It is stressful. More so because I am not able to take a time off at all. There is not time for me.”*

For Rakhi, the two identities, of a mother and teacher, work simultaneously throughout the day since March, 2020. She trusts that her job were her escape from the household which is not true when both responsibilities are confined in one space. Her husband does not perform any extra duties now that he is at home. Only two women noted the changed role or continuing role of husband in the house work. Rest of the women were managing their homes on their own, with or without jobs. Child care however was considered to be a mother job by the female respondents (Ali and Feroz, 2020; Collins et al, 2021; Cameron et al, 2020; Gulia et al, 2020; Russell et al, 2020; Thapa et at, 2020; Topalidau et al, 2020). Interestingly however, five out of total male respondents note that they contribute to the household chores.

The online classes according to the respondents have increased their workloads. Working women were facing twice the workload to deal with their jobs and home. The parents are substituting for the physical absence of teachers (Abuhammad, 2020; Bhamani et al, 2020; Dong et al, 2020; Garbe et al 2020). They find themselves more engaged in the class and homework. They have to learn new technologies and have to deal with constraints of space and private time. Gender roles are reiterated in the online scenarios as well where women are reported to be more engaged with the

children than the men. For younger children the engagement of the parents is more in comparison to the elder ones.

3.2 Experiences with the Online Schooling

The schools in the last past one year have not been the same as they ever were. As Minakshi, a 36-year-old mother of two children puts it, *“Do you know the concept of video homework? I never thought I will be asking my child to dress up in a costume for a homework. Or ask her to read a paragraph over a video. This this is messing up my brain sometimes. Will my child always be one screen from now on? Will she never experience the outside world. She studies online, play online, watch cartoons while eating or just before sleeping. She is always on the phone. She never talks, if not in a manner that she learnt online.”*

Online schooling is allowing parents to think about the addiction related issues of social media and phones. By being on phone the children are reducing their time in real time interaction with their peers and adults around them. Pre-COVID studies have shown that engagement with the mobile phones must be deferred to the latter stages (Dempsey and McCoy, 2019). In the post-COVID scenario however the mobile phones are essential that are influencing the development of children in many ways. Parents have to devise ways to mitigate the situation by involving children away from the mobile. In cases where both parents are working mobile phone also serve as a dummy guardian that keep child away from creating nuisance.

For Amit, 29-year-old father of a son, the dependencies have changed during the pandemic. He and his wife both work from home while the boy is on phone whole day. Amit, argues, *“I cannot comment on the use of mobile phone by my child. Me and my wife both are happy when he is on mobile. At least he is not bothering us or anyone. I have learnt that stay at home parenting is very hard. When he is bored of mobile we send him to my brother’s house. He lives nearby, that way we save us a lot of time and energy. My brother has two kids, my child gets busy with them.”*

Exploring new avenues of engaging children, like Amit did, is a way the pandemic has changed the interpersonal relationships amongst people. Like Amit, sixty percent of the respondents have agreed to have sent their children to the home of their relatives or neighbours to make their work easy or simply to get a shut eye for some time (Stokes and Patterson , 2020; Rodrigues et al, 2021; Thomason and Macias-Alonso, 2020). As children cannot go out to play they seek solace in smaller groups playing indoors with as many precautions as possible. The families and neighbours that otherwise do not form the major part of engagement for the couples, they were forced to take interest in them due to limited scope of interaction outside of the home (Okabe-Miyamoto et al, 2021). Children also were a common topic of discussion amongst the adults. All of the respondents agreed to have discussed education their child with other parents of the same school or the neighbours and relatives during the lockdown.

As Deepak, a 32-years-old father of two boys notes, *“We discussed either food or children with others. I work in finance, I simply cannot discuss my workout hey will not understand it. So these two were the simplest topics. I now know that my neighbour is able to focus on her child’s education due to pandemic. They are spending good time together which was not possible because of her job. This is also true for me. Also, everyone us has experienced increase in the school related expenditure during the lockdown. To think that I am teaching my child and still is spending more that when both of them were going to school. I also know that my child is happy when he our neighbour upstairs make him pizza. That is how I have experienced lockdown. There is lot of confusion and tragedy along with some good time together.”*

It was pertinent to look at varied experiences of parents as they understand online education along with their children, to understand the changes in the ideas of parenting during post-COVID times (Abuhammad, 2020; Bhamani et al, 2020; Dong et al, 2020; Garbe et al 2020). The experiences of being a parent also involves connecting to other people to ask for help, sharing and talking about education. The pandemic has allowed parents to connect with their children in various manners. Online education though need of the hour still throws challenges at the parents. All of the respondents agreed to the increased cost of school related expenditure during the lockdown.

4. Conclusion

The experience of online education has been overwhelming for the children and their parents. The unprecedented situation the pandemic has challenged everyone according to their abilities. The students while struggling have been exploring other the life in the house, constraints of physical and mental space and managing routines in the most non mundane time of twenty first century. The paradigm of education itself has undergone severe changes. The power relations along with mode of curriculum transfer is now mediated by the presence of screen in between the teacher and their students. Parallel to that the boundaries at home seems to have dissolved. The dining table is also a classroom, so is the sofa and kitchen. The transition between classes and other video activities are diminished. The children themselves are creating valuable experiences in the strangest of the times. The role of parents in this context has become extremely complex. There are ways in which they are challenged and burdened - physically, emotionally, and financially.

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