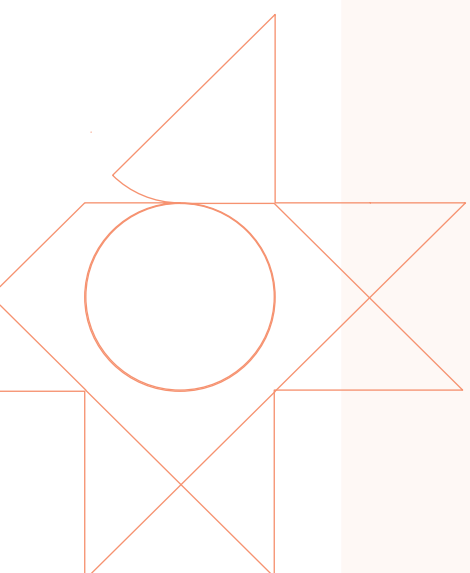




LIFE IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

Mapping the impact of Covid-19
on the lives of school going children
especially girls in India



CHAMPIONS
FOR GIRLS'
EDUCATION



Centre for Budget
and Policy Studies

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It is important to add that we alone are responsible for all errors and omissions.

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¹ India Champions for Girls' Education, an initiative, supported by Malala Fund, is made up of education champions across civil society who are working to speed up progress towards Girls' education. This study was developed, designed, and conducted by CBPS on behalf of India Champions for Girls' Education

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Executive Summary

A. Background of the study

The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected marginalised populations globally. With most schools being closed, and online education emerging as a common substitute, children from underprivileged backgrounds have been the worst hit. Not surprisingly, gender has added an additional layer to this disenfranchisement. In India, numerous girls at the intersections of gender, class and other structural hierarchies like caste, have little or no access to devices to smartphones or tablets. They also may be the first to be whisked away from their studies towards domestic duties. Even boys face the burden of their gender: the economic crisis brought about by the pandemic is going to push them towards child labour.

B. Sample and methods used for the study

Given this context, we undertook a survey of 3176 households across five states in India - Assam (five districts), Bihar (eight districts), Uttar Pradesh-UP (11 districts) and Telangana (four districts), and Delhi (one district) in order to understand three critical aspects – 1) The impact of Covid-19 on the livelihoods and earnings of families living on the margins and its relationship with the education of children. 2) The impact of school closures and lockdown on girls' education, including the changes in the social and familial environment that could impact enrolment and retention of girls in schools. 3) The landscape of the institutional and policy interventions with potential or intent to mitigate the adverse impact of Covid-19 on girls' education.

One adult and one child in the age-group of 10-18 years were individually interviewed from each household. The survey was conducted using two methods – door-to-door (73%) and telephonic interviews (27%), the choice being dependent on the access (physical and technological), comfort level and suitability for the field organisations. The tools were designed in a manner that it could be administered in either of these two modes with ease. The states that were included in the study are not represented equally; Bihar and UP constituted about 76% of our sample followed by Assam (18%), Telangana (6%) and a small proportion of sample came from a district in Delhi. The uneven size of the sample across states is explained by the fact that this was left to respective organisations considering the uncertain situation caused by the pandemic.

C. Household profile

The sample is fairly close to the population distribution in India with a tilt towards more marginalised groups: 36% OBCs (India: 41-52%), 39% SC/STs (India: 23-29%) and 18% minorities (India: 14-15%). The average size of the household in our sample was six.

More than 87% of the male members in these households primarily worked in the unorganised sector, while more than half of the women were engaged in unpaid domestic work (about one fourth of them engaged in paid occupations in the unorganised sector). This reveals the vulnerable status of these families, given the shrinkage of economic activities caused by the pandemic and associated

restrictive measures. Seasonal, short-term and long-term migration was common with almost half of the households reporting that at least one family member migrated for work to a different region, with the highest migrants reported in UP (66%) and Bihar (48%).

D. Impact of the pandemic on livelihoods and income

More than four-fifths of the population said that they did not have enough employment opportunities in their region, with Bihar (93%) and UP (86%) reporting the highest such cases, and Assam (64%) the lowest, as one fourth of them were engaged locally as tea plantation workers².

About 84% of households reported facing cash shortages (barring Telangana where only half of them said so), of which 47% said that they are facing shortages since the lockdown started in the end of March and 15% started feeling the impact since early May/June, when they seemed to have exhausted their existing savings. Food shortage seems to have disproportionately affected the minorities, with 70% of them saying that there was not enough food at home.

E. Inadequate response

Food and Cash Relief³: A large proportion of the households (85%) said that they received some kind of support from the government and this was fairly high for Bihar (92%) and UP (91%), while it was just 44% for Telangana⁴. About 83% and 64% households in Assam and Telangana respectively, reported receiving food through Anganwadis. This was lower in states like Bihar (20%) and UP (18%).

About 54% of the households said that they received cash transfers into their bank account through various schemes. In UP, the percentage was low, as only 41% said they received any cash transfers whereas this proportion was high in Telangana (87%), where a number of state government sponsored schemes have also been operational.

Educational Support: The department of Education also transferred cash in certain states for specific purposes such as stipend, scholarships or purchase of uniform, but only 12% of the entire sample reported receiving any such transfers during the pandemic.

F. Impact of the pandemic on education and schooling

School education has been hit the hardest, because it caters to children who, unlike adults, are not in full control of their own lives, as is clear from the findings. Majority of the adolescents in the sample were in

² Tea gardens in Assam resumed work in May 2020, much before the opening of the other sectors of the economy (<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/lockdown-work-begins-in-some-assam-tea-gardens-with-full-workforce/article31558879.ece>)

³ The relief measures announced till the time of the survey included additional cash transfers through already existing schemes like the Jan-Dhan Yojana and the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana, food or dry ration distribution through the existing Public Distribution System (PDS) and also creation of additional employment opportunities through the Atmanirbhar Bharat package which made an additional outlay of USD 5430 million for the existing Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) scheme by expanding the number of days of guaranteed employment.

⁴ The most commonly distributed items received by the households included food items, cooked or uncooked – 85% in UP, 68% in Assam, and 42% in Bihar. Only three-fourth of households in Bihar reported receiving the additional ration from the PDS system. In UP about one-third of our sample reported not receiving any additional ration. Assam and Telangana fared relatively better with 85% in Assam and 98% in Telangana having said that they received additional ration.

upper primary/early secondary (grades 6-8) [49%] and secondary (grades 9-10) [23%], while nearly 15% of the boys and girls were in primary (grades 1-5) and 12% in senior secondary grades (grades 11-12). This distribution clearly shows that these adolescents were in their formative years of learning and at critical phases of transition.

About 61% of the students said that the syllabus was not complete before school closure. When asked as to how much of the syllabus was left to be completed, about 27% said that the syllabus was mostly incomplete for most of the subjects that they had undertaken and only 35% of them said that syllabus was complete at least for a few subjects.

Life was better before the lockdown

An overwhelming majority of boys and girls (78%) said that their life was better before the lockdown. When asked as to why they felt so, more than half (58%) of the students said that the school ensured a place for them to study, followed by being a place for social interaction. The non-conducive learning environment at home was clearly seen by the time-use data where a high proportion of girls reported being engaged in chores and care work (71%) as against boys (38%), while a higher proportion of boys (79%) reported spending time on leisure activities as against girls (60%). Similarly, a higher percentage (56%) of boys were able to spend time on their studies, as against 46% of girls.

Limited and gendered access to technology

When it came to accessing education via technology, our data shows that the mere presence of devices does not ensure access. Second, it reveals a gendered pattern to access. While 52% children reported having a TV at home, only 11% reported viewing / listening to the educational broadcast on TV or radio. This was despite the fact that more than half (52%) of the students had a television set at home, showing that the presence of a physical device at home does not guarantee usage and access.

Likewise, despite there being a phone at home, only 30% children reported access, with only 26% girls having access to phones, versus 37% boys. This becomes all the more significant when we learn that in 71% of cases, phones are owned by a male family member. Children from households who reported facing financial difficulties also reported relatively lower access to phones, with only 38% of such children being confident about having access to a phone whenever there was a need, in comparison to 53% adolescents belonging to households with no financial difficulties saying the same.

Uncertainties in going back to school

It was encouraging to note that majority of the boys and girls in the study said a hopeful 'yes' (56%) when asked if they would return to schools when they reopen, with only 2% of them saying 'no'. But a considerable proportion of adolescents did not respond to this question (about 37%) pointing to looming uncertainties.

This proportion is higher amongst private school students, versus those in government schools. It is clear that adolescents from households facing food and cash shortages are perceiving greater risk of not going back to school in comparison to households which did not report any such difficulties.

While 78% of boys and 76% of girls from households who did not have any food or cash shortage said that they would go back to school after the schools reopened, only 50% boys and girls from households who faced both cash and food shortage said the same.

G. Conclusion

In conclusion, we found that Covid-19 and the lockdown have caused notable income and employment loss leading to food, cash and livelihood crises with severe implications for children's education. The government's relief measures have been inadequate with very limited reach and have resulted in violation of the right to food. In the education sector, interventions have been grossly under-accessed due to multiple barriers faced by children from marginalised groups. In short, there has been a violation of the right to education and high potential of widening disparities in education. In particular, the gendered impact of the pandemic may reverse the gains made in gender parity in education and empowerment unless addressed comprehensively.

H. Key recommendations

- 1) Inclusive and responsive methods to enable continuity in education while adhering to provisions and entitlements under the Right to Education Act 2009
- 2) Decentralised and contextual pathways for smooth transition to school reopening
- 3) Adequate support to teachers
- 4) Build safeguards for preventing adverse fallouts of the family's economic distress on the child's education
- 5) Build back better and reimagine education for all

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1. Introduction

1.1 Context of the Study

The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted 1.8 billion students around the world because of school closures, of which 320 million are in India. It is estimated that many of them are unlikely to ever return to the classroom, burdened with increased poverty, household chores and child labour. Marginalised communities such as the poor, SC/STs⁵ and religious minorities are likely to be the most impacted by this upheaval. Gender adds an additional layer to such disenfranchisement. Interruptions in learning have been seen to have a greater impact on girls as compared to boys.

Even prior to the pandemic, girls were already twice as likely as boys to have less than four years of education, as also the least likely member of the household to have access to the internet. They were also the first to be burdened with domestic and care work, which directly affects the time they spend on studies or leisure activities. The economic impact of Covid-19 will increase the risk of early dropout, as girls become more vulnerable to child marriage, child labour, trafficking, violence or sexual abuse⁶. Boys too face the impact of their gender, with many of them being pushed towards child labour in order to supplement household income.

Technology supported education – online classes, radio and TV broadcasts/telecasts – the most common substitute globally has further exacerbated inequalities within education. Most children from marginalised sections may not have access to smart phones, computers tablets, or even radio or TV. Absence of functional electricity connections, frequent power cuts, unstable internet connectivity and affordability to access internet services add to this challenge.

Gender-based discrimination further limits girls' access to technological devices in many contexts. For instance, Centre for Budget and Policy Studies (CBPS) in India conducted a telephonic survey recently in Bihar and found that out of 733 children (253 boys and 480 girls) in classes seventh and eighth, 202 (28%) had no phone and 154 (21%) could not be reached as the number was not operational. Only half of the children could be reached by phone. Of these, 277 (38%) had smart phone and 114 (16%) had basic handsets. Not surprisingly, a higher percentage of boys (36%) had access to smart phones as compared to girls (28%). Families with no phones had greater representation of girls and hence, CBPS could reach only 44% of intended girls as against 51% of intended boys.

A staggering majority of families that did have smart phones (95% of the 277 cases) reported that the device belonged to a male member, not always accessible to children, especially girls. A number of girls said that they were not in a position to use it for learning purposes. In any case, about half of the families with smart phones did not always have access as they could not afford the active internet access-based packages. Boys also faced distress, as they are expected to earn and contribute to the household income.

⁵ Schedule Castes/Schedule Tribes

⁶ 'Building Back Better: Gender-responsive strategies to address the impact of Covid-19 on girls' education,' RTE Forum factsheet.

Hence, this study was carried out to understand the impact of Covid-19 on the lives and education of children, especially girls, coming from deprived and marginalised families, and to gauge the support (or its absence) that helped or could help in this hour of crisis.

1.2 Objectives

The main objectives of the study were:

- To understand the impact of Covid-19 on the livelihoods and earnings of families living on the margins and its relationship with the education of children
- To map the impact of school closures and lockdown on girls' education, including the changes in the social and familial environment that could impact enrolment and retention of girls in schools
- To map the landscape of the institutional and policy interventions with potential or intent to mitigate the adverse impact of Covid-19 on girls' education.

1.3 Geography of Coverage⁷

The survey-based study was conducted in selected areas across five Indian states: Assam (five districts), Bihar (8 districts), Uttar Pradesh-UP (11 districts) and Telangana (four districts), and Delhi⁸ (one district)⁹.

Although these states represent a mix of developed and under-developed regions, our sample areas are relatively backward sub-regions and hence the results cannot be taken as representative of the entire country. The findings are more representative of the families living on the margins and there, the study covers a wide range of livelihoods and areas: from tea estates worker of Assam to artisan-based industries in UP, and from daily wage-agricultural workers and marginal farmers in Bihar and UP to unorganised sector workers in Delhi.



Figure 1: States in which survey was conducted

⁷ Over the last few years in India, Malala Fund has had continual long-term engagement with local partners working for the education of girls, especially those belonging to the marginalised sections of the society. The study has been conducted in partnership with these organisations, namely: Right to Education Forum (RTEF), Joint Operation for Social Help (JOSH), Azad India Foundation (AIF), NEDAN Foundation, North East Research & Social Work Networking (NERSWN), Navbharat Samaj Kalyan Samiti (NBSKS), Samudaik Kalyan Evam Vikas Sansthan (SVKS), Purva Bharati Educational Trust (PBET).

⁸ Delhi is considered a limited state and is referred to as the National Capital Territory (NCT). However, the report does refer to Delhi as a state for easy reference.

⁹ More details can be seen in Table 1 in the Appendix

1.4 Areas of Enquiry

The study was designed around the following critical areas of enquiry:

- (i) Social, demographic and economic profile of the household and the immediate impact of the pandemic on the financial and livelihood security
- (ii) The impacts of the pandemic and school closure on the education and lives of children between the age-group of 10-18 years, including how they spend their time in absence of schools and the status of access to and use of technology for learning
- (iii) The kind of support the household received from the education department, governments and civil society, especially in the context of income and livelihood losses and compensation for the loss of learning due to school-closure.

1.5 Methods and Sample

The study is based on household survey where one adult and a child in the age-group of 10-18 years were individually interviewed in every household. We spoke to the households in two parts, one to the parent/guardian for about 20 minutes and then with their permission, we spoke to one adolescent girl or boy from the same household for another 20 minutes.

The survey was conducted mostly in the month of July 2020 with a few surveys extending to the first week of August 2020 – the period was challenging in terms of the pandemic spread, various kinds of lockdowns and regulations imposed by respective state governments and heavy rains resulting in floods, especially in parts of Assam and Bihar. In all, we were able to speak to 3176 households and the same number of children¹⁰. In our sample, 61% of the respondents (parents/guardians) were male and 38% female. Bihar was the only state where there seemed to be an equal proportion of men (52%) and women (48%) who responded.

Almost all, barring 10 children (four boys and six girls) interviewed were school-going children because of the purposive sampling we have discussed earlier. Sixty-seven percent were female and 33% were male in our sample of children. The higher representation of girls in the sample compared to boys is explained by the fact that Malala Fund partners primarily work with girls from vulnerable sections of the population.

The study was conducted in partnership with the organisations with presence in the field and hence the selection of household was guided by the rapport built by them over a period of time making it feasible to carry out such a survey in difficult times like these. The survey was conducted using two methods – door-to-door (73%) and telephonic interviews (27%), the choice being dependent on the access (physical and technological), comfort level and suitability for the field organisations. The tools were designed in a manner that it could be administered in either of these two modes with ease.

The states that were included in the study are not represented equally; Bihar and UP constituted about 76% of our sample followed by Assam (18%), Telangana (6%) and a small proportion of sample came from one district in Delhi. The uneven size of the sample across states is also explained by the fact that this was left to respective organisations considering the uncertain situation caused by the pandemic.

¹⁰ The report uses children and adolescent interchangeably for the child respondent.

1.6 The Report

The report is organised in five sections taking this introduction into account. The following three sections analyse the findings around three areas of inquiry discussed earlier, which is followed by conclusions. Considering the uneven size of samples from different states, the analysis gives an emphasis to overall patterns while referring to state specific data as well. The inter-state comparisons are largely confined to three states: Assam, Bihar and UP, especially the latter two, for this very reason.

2. Who These Families Are

The households we interviewed represent the poorer sections of India and their respective states: Bihar and UP are largely underdeveloped, primarily agrarian economies, with low literacy, high population density and lack of industrialisation. Assam in the North East is economically backward, often facing ethnic conflicts and disasters such as flood.

Caste determines access to services in South Asia (Mosse, 2018)¹¹ and SCs, STs and OBCs¹² recognised to be educationally backward, among whom, SCs/ STs are also often the poorest. The caste composition of the sample is fairly close to the population distribution in India with a tilt towards more marginalised groups: 36% OBCs [India: 41-52%], 39% SC/STs [India: 23-29%] and 18% minorities [India: 14-15%].

2.1 Family Demographics and Occupational Structure

The average size of the household in our sample was six, this being eight in UP and six in Bihar (Figure 2)¹³. While such large-sized families can detrimentally impact lives and livelihoods – scarce resources adversely influencing the nutritional and educational outcomes of children (Kugler, et al, 2017) – they also imply, greater support. There is sharing of household chores and also greater security where one loss of livelihood can be compensated with the support of another earning family member.

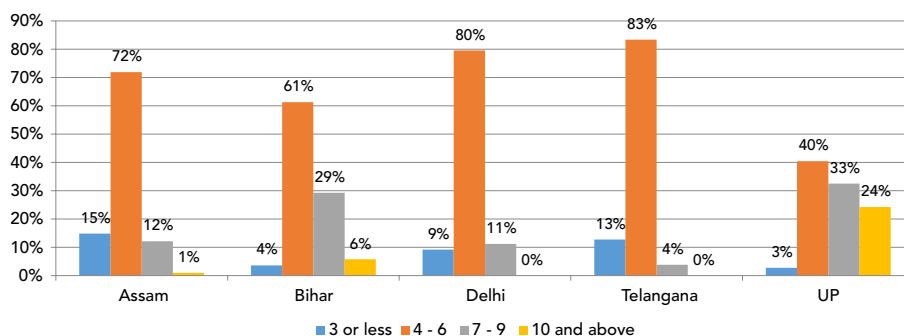


Figure 2: Household sizes across States

More than 87% of the male members in these households primarily worked in the unorganised sector. One fifth of them were involved in agriculture-based occupations, either farming their own or rented land and some engaged in animal husbandry activities. More than 40% of them were primarily daily wage labourers or were engaged in MGNREGA¹⁴ work, while more than half the women in these households were primarily engaged in unpaid domestic household work and about one fourth of them were

¹¹ <https://reader.elsevier.com/reader/sd/pii/S0305750X18301943?token=876108F64F8931135FAB4CECBBB14FC949F620AE2F07EFDCBEF40CFCE5AEBEEE1008EC00373A5D7D379ED4897989F3A3>

¹² Other Backward Castes

¹³ All figures and tables are sourced from Primary data collected from the field (July 2020), unless otherwise stated.

¹⁴ Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) provides legal guarantee for one hundred days of employment in every financial year to adult members of any rural household willing to do public work (unskilled manual work) at the statutory minimum wage.

engaged in paid occupations in the unorganised sector. Just 3% of the male as well as female adults in these families had a public sector or government job (Figure 3). This reveals the vulnerable status of these families, especially in a situation when the demand for majority of these jobs ceased to exist due to shrinkage of economic activities caused by the pandemic and associated restrictive measures. Further investigation into data also showed the linkages between land-ownership, occupational structure and caste.

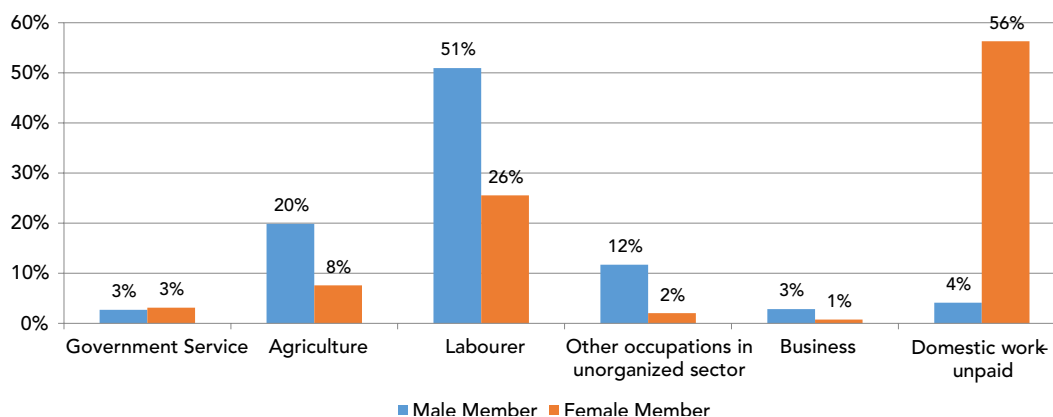


Figure 3: Primary occupations of male and female members in household

A higher proportion of households belonging to the general category¹⁵ and OBCs households engaged in agricultural occupations owned their farm land (30% and 18% respectively) as compared to the SC/ST population (10%). Among the General Category, 77% worked in the unorganised sector while this proportion was higher for OBCs (86%) and SC/ST households (89%). This reveals that while majority of these families are poor, the SC and ST households are even more marginalised than others.

These could have a bearing on children’s continued schooling, especially for girls as shown by a few studies in India (Jha and Jhingran, 2006) as well as in other countries¹⁶. Children belonging to low-income households have to face structural barriers due to resource deprivation (Usaini, M. I. et al, 2015), which can exacerbate their vulnerability.

2.2 Internal Migration Challenge to Education Systems

Seasonal, short-term and long-term migration to urban areas is a common coping strategy for the rural poor, either to add to their income from primary sources or also to search for primary occupation¹⁷. Bihar along with other poor states like Odisha and Uttar Pradesh has one of the highest migrating populations that move to richer states like Delhi, and rural production sites in Gujarat and Maharashtra (De Haan, 2011).

Our survey also found the same with 66% respondents reporting having at least one family member who had migrated for work (Figure4). The all-India estimate for migrant workers vary between 30 to 140 million¹⁸, with rural-to-urban migration and seasonal migration posing some of the biggest challenges

¹⁵ General category refers to non-SC-ST-OBC population – the so-called upper caste groups.

¹⁶ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/4899207_Why_Do_Girls_in_Rural_China_Have_Lower_School_Enrollment

¹⁷ http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/FIELD/New_Delhi/pdf/voltwo.pdf#page=7

¹⁸ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/10/india-has-139-million-internal-migrants-we-must-not-forget-them/#:~:text=The%20Economic%20Survey%20of%20India,at%20a%20staggering%20139%20million.>

for education systems even in normal circumstances (UNESCO, Global Education Monitoring Report, 2019). This assumes greater importance in the present context, as large-scale loss in jobs, income, and in some cases even lives were reported for migrant workers in the wake of the pandemic. Although data is still lacking,¹⁹ the impact of the current migrant crisis in India on children's education can be severe. Children returning with their parents from urban areas need to cope with rural settings, rural schools may face overcrowding, all compounded by income-loss and financial crisis.

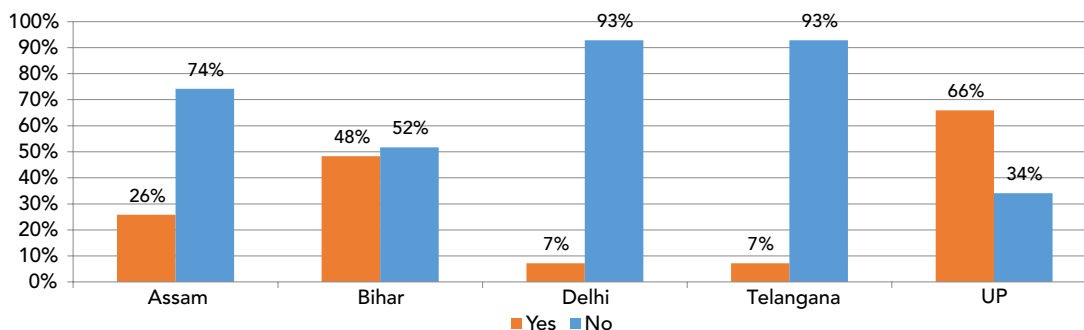


Figure 4: Percentage of households with at least one member migrating for work

2.3 Low Incidence of Covid-19

We also wanted to understand if our respondents were already exposed to Covid-19 due to the risks associated with such vulnerable populations. The survey was conducted in July when the lockdown restrictions were slowly being eased all across the country, in different phases. Most of our respondents, i.e. about 88% of them, said that no one in the household had contracted Covid-19. Just eight of our respondents in a sample of 3176 households reported a positive case while 12% chose not to answer the question. This could be due to high stigma attached to positive cases with a lot of false rumours spread about the virus and the fear of ostracising by the community. However, it is also important to note that India is experiencing a very high spike in Covid-19 cases since August 2020.

The following section discusses the early impact of Covid-19 and associated restrictive measures on the income and livelihoods in these families who anyway lived in insecure circumstances and did not have many options to fall back on.

¹⁹ <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/no-data-on-migrant-deaths-so-no-compensation-government-to-parliament-2295409> and <https://thewire.in/labour/india-migrant-workers-covid-19-crisis-socio-economic-status>

3. Impact of the Pandemic on Livelihoods and Income

India's lockdown was one of the harshest²⁰, causing the economy to come to a standstill in its first phase in April and May, 2020. The abrupt announcement of the nationwide lockdown on March 25th, 2020 – and related administrative issues/failures led to the widely-reported migrant crisis²¹, which in turn led to cash and food crises²². The data also shows that the lockdown has disproportionately affected the marginalised caste groups by a factor of three as there is over-representation of them in vulnerable jobs (Deshpande, A et al, 2020).

3.1 Shrinking Employment Opportunities

More than four-fifths of the population said that they did not have enough employment opportunities in their village or area during the time of this survey with the highest numbers²³ emerging from Bihar (93%) and UP (86%), and lowest in Assam where the tea garden industry – a major source of employment – opened up sooner than other sectors.

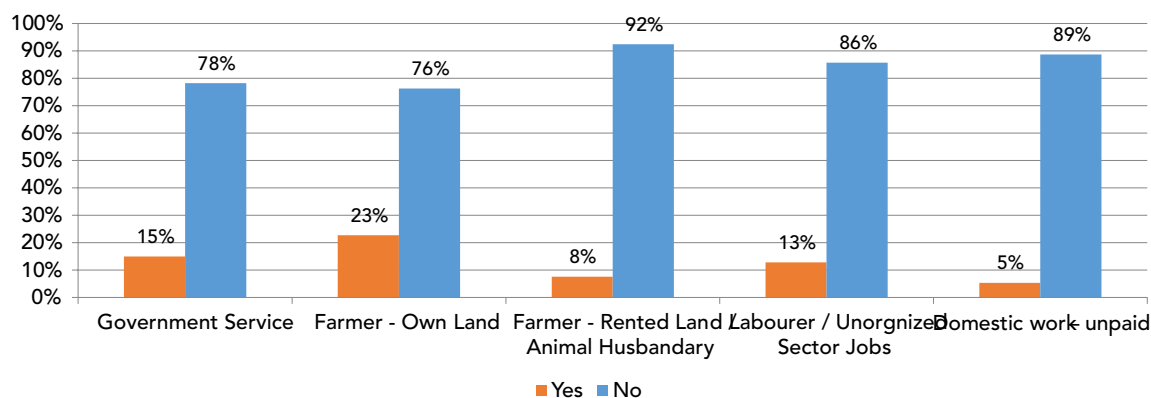


Figure 5: Availability of employment opportunities based on occupation type of male member

Male members engaged in low-skilled jobs in the unorganised sector were more susceptible to job losses, with 86% of them reported not having enough employment opportunities. This was marginally better for people engaged in agricultural work, with one-fourth of the land owners saying that they had enough employment opportunities, probably due to the kharif sowing season, although it was a cause for worry that, 92% of the farmers working on rented land cited lack of opportunities (Figure 5).

²⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jul/04/india-lockdowns-cases-rising->

²¹ For further contextual information on this crises refer to :<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52672764>

²² <https://www.indiaspend.com/100-120-million-jobs-lost-due-to-covid-19-lockdown/>

²³ The lowest numbers came from Assam (64%) as one fourth of them were engaged locally as tea plantation workers. Tea industry in Assam was also hit hard by the Lockdown due to reduction in demand but it opened up much before other sectors did and as a result, local workers could resume their work. (<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/covid-19-complete-lockdown-hits-tea-industry-hard-in-assam/articleshow/75437962.cms>)

3.2 Food and Cash Shortages

Food and cash are the most basic units of survival in an economic crisis. About 84% of our respondents in all states reported facing cash shortages, barring Telangana where only half of them said they are facing cash shortages. Among the ones reporting cash shortages, about 47% said that they are facing shortages since the lockdown in March and about 15% felt the impact starting early May/June when they seem to have exhausted existing savings (Figure 6). A little less than one-fifth of the families reported always having a cash crunch at home.

This means that while nearly 20% faced cash-shortages even before this crisis, the proportion went up to 55% with the start of the lockdown and close to 70% of this sample, one month into the lockdown.

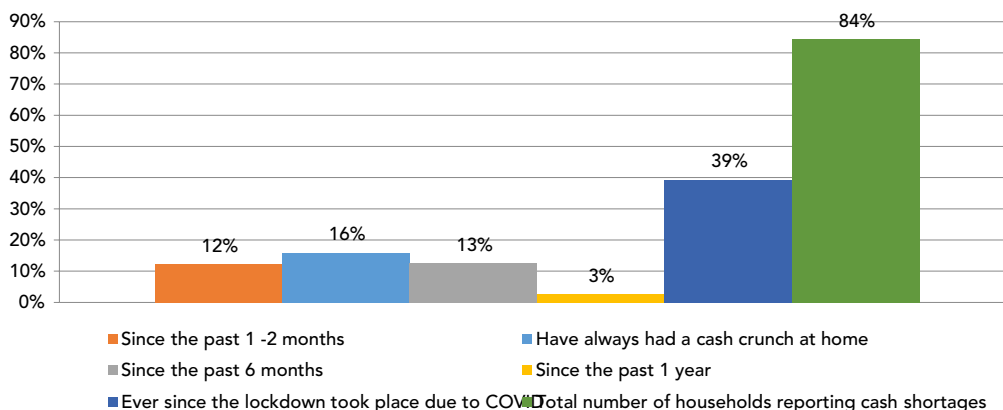


Figure 6: Time since household facing a cash crunch at home

When asked if there was enough food at home, 63% of them reported food shortages, with Bihar reporting the highest food shortage, at 71%. The respondents reporting food shortage adopted various coping strategies which included eating only cereals and cutting down on milk and vegetables (42%), borrowing (20%) and selling assets (9%). Disturbingly, 8% of our respondents said they went hungry.

For school-going children, now being at home and no longer getting cooked mid-day meals, this indicates higher incidences of hunger and malnutrition. In the case of the school-going girls, this only gets heightened given the nutritional discrimination they face within their families, with male siblings often getting far more nutritious food than female siblings²⁴.

Food shortage seems to have disproportionately affected the minorities, with 70% of them saying that there was not enough food at home. When we looked at households facing food and cash shortage, 58% of them reported facing both, 25% of them said that they were facing only a cash shortage. Only 10% of our sample seemed to be financially stable at the time of survey, saying that they did not have either a food or a cash shortage (Figure 7).

²⁴ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4167551/>

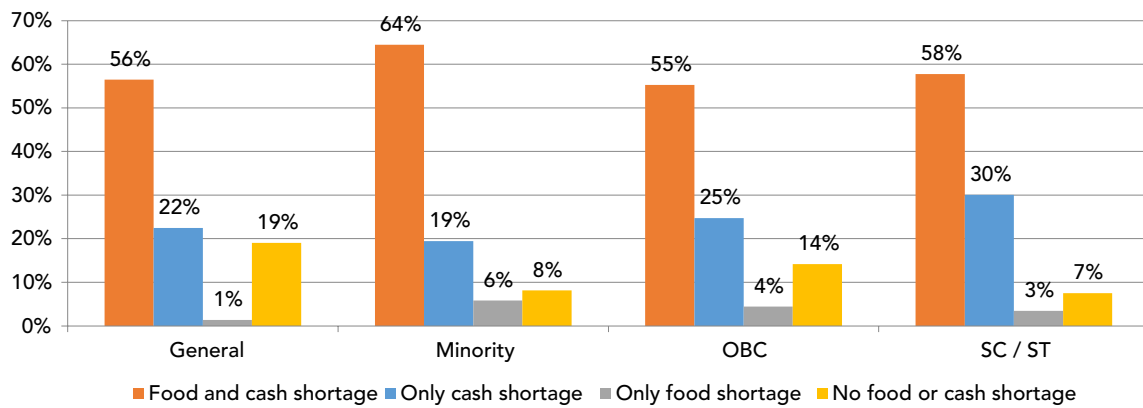


Figure 7: Food and cash shortages by Caste groups

We next move to examine the impact of Covid-19 and the lockdown, especially closure of schools, on education of 10-20-year-old children. Here, we first discuss the disruptions in education caused by the pandemic and move on to understand what it could mean for their daily routines and continued schooling. We attempted to associate whether the impact on livelihoods, cash and food-shortages in the household had any repercussion for schooling and education, and found these as closely associated.

4. Impact of Covid-19 on Education and Schooling

As well-recorded now, the Covid-19 has caused large scale disruption for learners, teachers, families, school managements, and all stakeholders of education²⁵. A recent UN Policy Brief suggests that 94% of learners worldwide, amounting to 1.58 billion children and adolescents from pre-primary to higher education are affected by the pandemic.

Majority of the adolescents in the sample were in upper primary/early secondary (grades 6-8) [49%] and secondary (grades 9-10) [23%], while nearly 15% of the boys and girls were in primary (grades 1-5) and 12% in senior secondary grades (grades 11-12). The state-wise data shows that most of the children were in the upper primary and secondary levels in all states (Figure 8) except for Delhi where a slightly higher number of boys and girls were in senior secondary (29%) compared to other states²⁶.

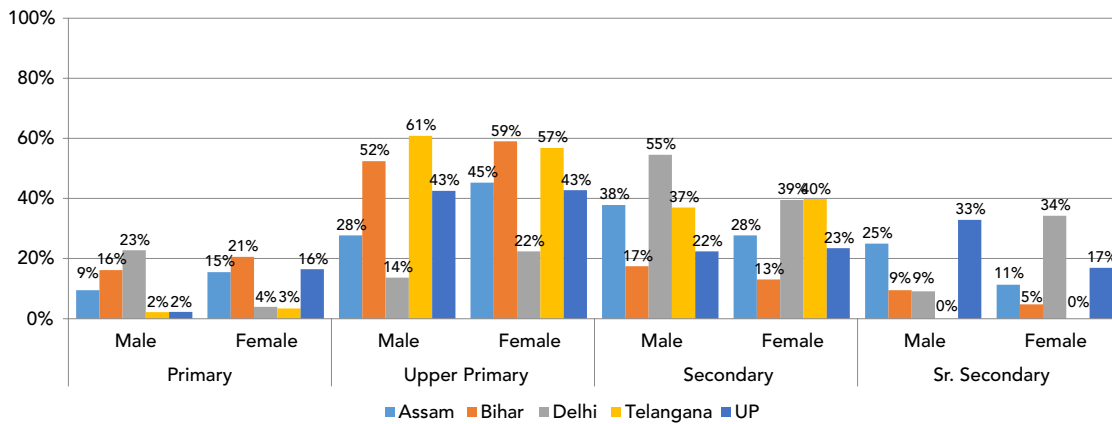


Figure 8: Educational Profile of Adolescents by Class and Gender

This distribution clearly shows that these adolescents were in their formative years of learning and at critical phases of transition marked by the movement from upper-primary to secondary, or from secondary to senior secondary stages. In general, drop outs occur at transitional stages, between class 5 and 6 for elementary, 10 and 11 for secondary and between class 12 and higher education for tertiary (Alspaugh, 2000). Therefore, any major disruption such as a prolonged school closure could enhance the risks of drop-outs. Other factors contributing to children dropping out, includes loss of learning, and bureaucratic hurdles (like difficulty in procuring school leaving certificates and transfer certificates). This is the background against which we have analysed the data.

²⁵ United Nation. (2020) Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and beyond. <https://unsdg.un.org/resources/policy-brief-education-during-covid-19-and-beyond> (accessed on 10th September 2020)

²⁶ Formal schooling in India is divided into four stages – Stage 1 – Primary - Class 1 to 5 - consisting of children in the age group of 6 to 11 years, Stage 2 – Upper Primary – Class 6 to 8 consisting of children in the age group of 12 to 14 years. These two stages combine to form the elementary stages of schooling. While Stage 3 – Secondary – is from class 9 to 10 consisting of children between the ages of 15 and 16, and Stage 4 – Senior Secondary – consisting of children in the ages of 17 and 18 years.

4.1 Disruption in Schooling Caused by Covid-19

With all schools closed in the country due to the pandemic and possibility of them remaining closed for the foreseeable future, we wanted to understand its implications for the academic cycle. We did this by asking students about syllabus completion and status of examination before the nation-wide lockdown was announced. This needs to be studied in the background of school disruptions even prior to the pandemic for example in Bihar, where the schools were closed from February 2020 itself due to the ongoing teachers strike in government schools. With growing number of cases and shifting patterns of the Covid-19, the uncertainty about the time and nature of school re-opening continues²⁷.

About 61% of the students said that the syllabus was not complete before school closure with the highest numbers reported from Assam at 89%. (Figure 9). This is possibly because the state follows the January-December academic cycle, but it also means that these children would probably not re-enter schools during this academic year. However, Bihar and UP follow an academic cycle of April-March and hence the fact that the majority (63% in Bihar and 53% in UP) reported non-completion by mid-March when the lockdown was imposed, is a cause of concern. Similar is the case with Telangana where 54% students from a sample of 180 said that the syllabus was complete. The only exception was seen in Delhi (which also follows April-March academic cycle), where 88% of the students said that the syllabus was complete.

When asked as to how much of the syllabus was left to be completed, about 27% said that the syllabus was mostly incomplete for most of the subjects. And only 35% of them said that syllabus was complete at least for a few subjects.

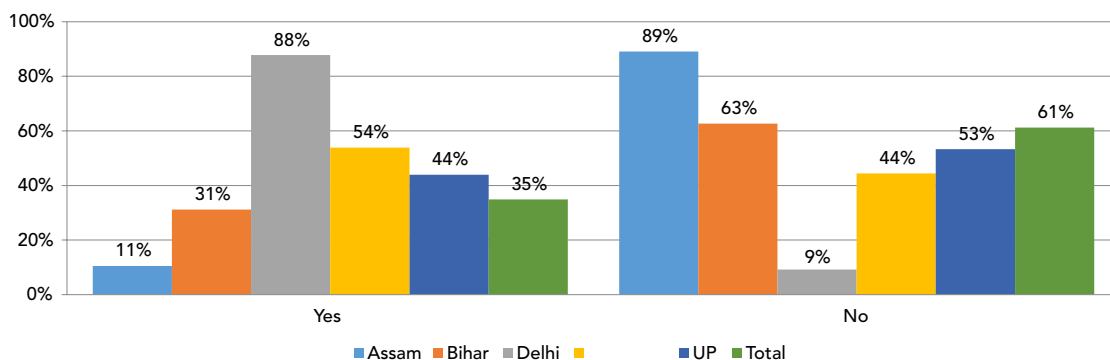


Figure 9: Status of Syllabus completion by State

In terms of classes, more than half of the students in upper primary (56%) reported that the syllabus was complete, while 67% in primary reported that the syllabus was incomplete. Even though, exams for most classes were not conducted with 74% of the students reporting the same, it is to be noted that all state governments have allowed for promotion to the next class on the basis of the academic performance of students in unit tests and midterm exams. This has implications for the next academic year, as these children have or are about to be promoted to the next class without adequately learning the curriculum for the current grade.

²⁷ The government of India has come up with an SOP for partial reopening of schools from class 9 to 12 on 8th September 2020. Although, the schools were supposed to open on a voluntary basis, how schools ensure safety protocols, inclusion in access and resultant exclusions remained unclear. The notifications from union and state governments have led to change of dates several times, and still at the time of writing this report, remains unclear. (<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/services/education/government-issues-sop-for-partial-reopening-of-schools-for-class-9-to-12-from-september-21/articleshow/77999555.cms?from=mdr>)

For those in grades 10 and 12, terminal grades for respective stages, the performances in the public examinations (commonly known as 'Board Examination'), becomes critical for admission to the next level. Since it is widely used as a filtration parameter, any disruption can have long term implications. All five sample states, conducted public exams for class 10 and 12. However, the class-wise numbers (see figure 10) show that only 40 % of the students in senior secondary and 25% students in secondary classes did appear for the exams. It remains unclear how these would impact further education of these children as it would largely depend on the measures and relaxations announced by respective state governments.

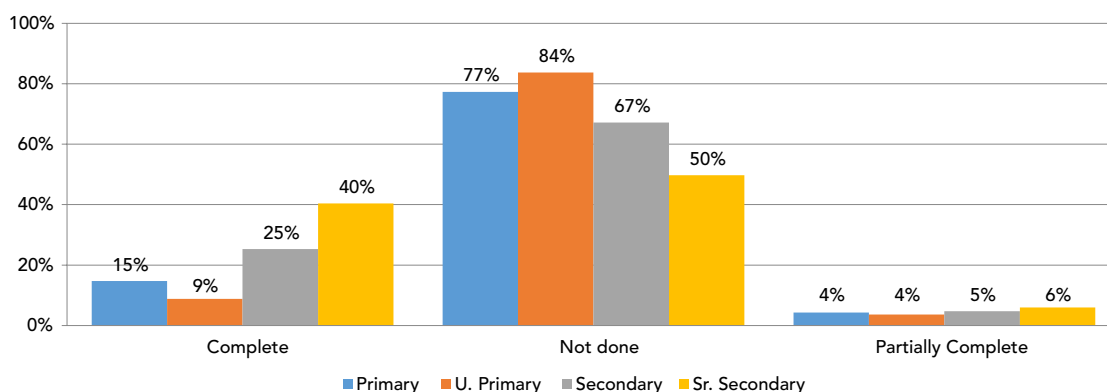


Figure 10: Conducting of Final Exams - Class wise

School closure caused major disruptions for children not only academically, but also hampered their exposure to various activities, peer learning, friendships, building relationships. For girls this had greater ramifications, limiting the only opportunity to be mobile and closing their window to the outside world. We explore these impacts to some extent in the next section.

4.2 Life Was Better Before the Lockdown

It was not easy to map the impact of the pandemic and school closures on children and to address the issues of change in lives of children through a survey, either telephonic or door-to-door, without much space to use other methods that could have allowed us to delve deeper. With that limitation, and in order to get the children's perspective of their own lives, we asked them a simple question – 'Was your life better before the lockdown or is it better now?'

An overwhelming majority of boys and girls (78%) said that their life was better before the lockdown. There was not much variation in the answers provided by both the genders as 79% of the girls and 76% of the boys said that their lives were better before the lockdown. Almost all the adolescents in Delhi (91%) in the sample said that their life was better before, followed by 87% in Bihar, 74% in UP, 71% in Telangana and 60% in Assam. Although very few (11%) adolescents said that their lives did not change much due to the pandemic and the lockdown, this number was relatively high in Assam, with 28 % boys and girls saying the same (Figure 11). This could be due to the fact that lives did not change as much in the tea garden areas as in other places, as we saw earlier in the context of livelihood and employment opportunities.

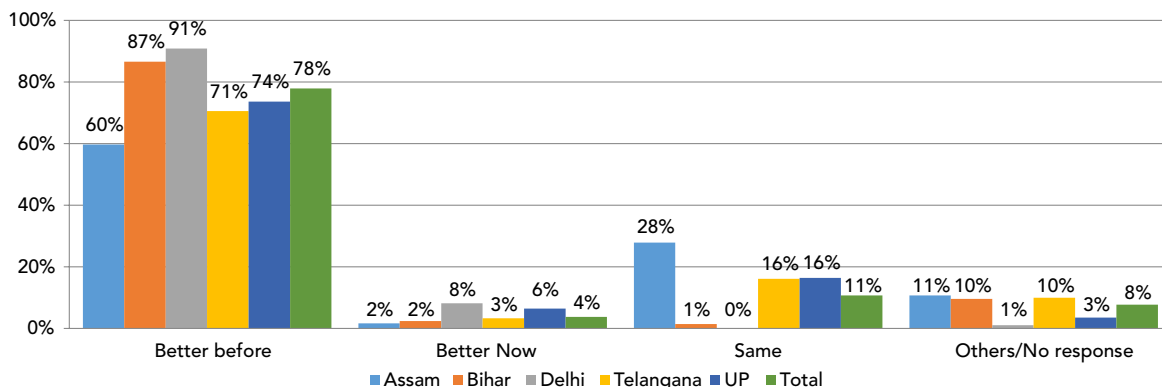


Figure 11: Life Pre and Post Lockdown

More than half (58%) of the students explained this was because school meant being able to study, followed by peer interaction as the second most common reason, as stated by 21% of students (Figure 11).

The lack of social interaction and peer presence was cited as the second most common reason by the students where 21% of them said that they preferred their lives earlier because they could meet their friends and play without any hindrance, unlike the present situation. About 5% of the students said that their mobility was severely curtailed by the pandemic and the lockdown, and 3% said that there was cash and food shortage at home due to the loss of employment opportunities and economic vulnerabilities caused by Covid-19 (Figure 12).

Even though there was not much difference between the responses from girls and boys, a relatively higher proportion of boys (23%) said that their life was better before as they could earlier meet and play with friends, as compared to girls (19%) who said the same. The caste-wise data also showed a similar pattern, where most adolescents irrespective of their caste, mentioned the same reason of missing out on education as the primary response for why they considered their lives to be better before Covid-19.

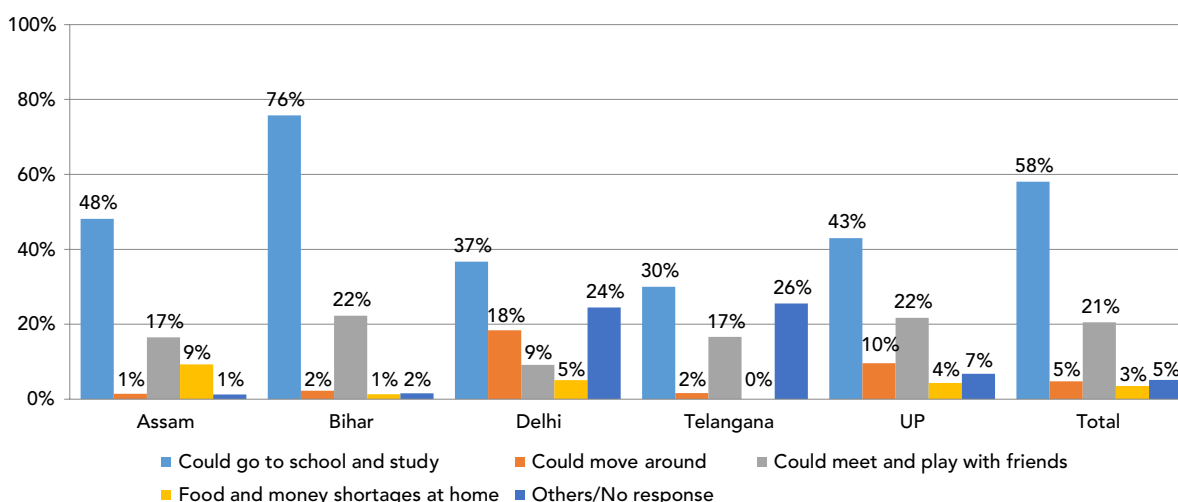


Figure 12: Reasons for life being better pre Covid-19

This implies that most of these children felt isolated and alone, and some severely confined. We often found children expressing a deep sense of loss and anxiety around missing out on education. ‘Earlier, I could go to school and study, I am not able to do the same at home’ was a statement commonly echoed by both boys and girls during the field work.

For girls and boys, the experience of being at home for such lengths of time as anticipated was different, with more girls expressing that they were better off going to school. While both missed going to school and getting an education as well as meeting and socializing with friends what they were doing during their stay at home was evidently different.

We tried to understand this through a question on time-use: how a child is spending his or her time during the pandemic and away from school.

4.3 Care-Work and Chores: Highly Gendered Pattern

A clear gendered pattern emerged when we analysed the time-use pattern, which simply means how children spent their typical day²⁸. A high proportion of girls reported being engaged in chores and care work (71%) as against boys (38%) while a higher proportion of boys (79%) reported spending time on leisure activities as against girls (60%). Similarly, 56% of boys as against 46% of girls reported spending any time on studies (Figure 13).

Therefore, the data not only pointed towards increased work and care responsibilities for girls in comparison to boys, it also showed a worrying pattern where less than half of the girls were able to spend time on learning. It is important to note here that we collected data for two children – one the respondent and the other, his or her sibling, preferably of the other sex and similar age group. This allowed us to examine intra-household disparities in time use of girls in comparison to boys from the same household.

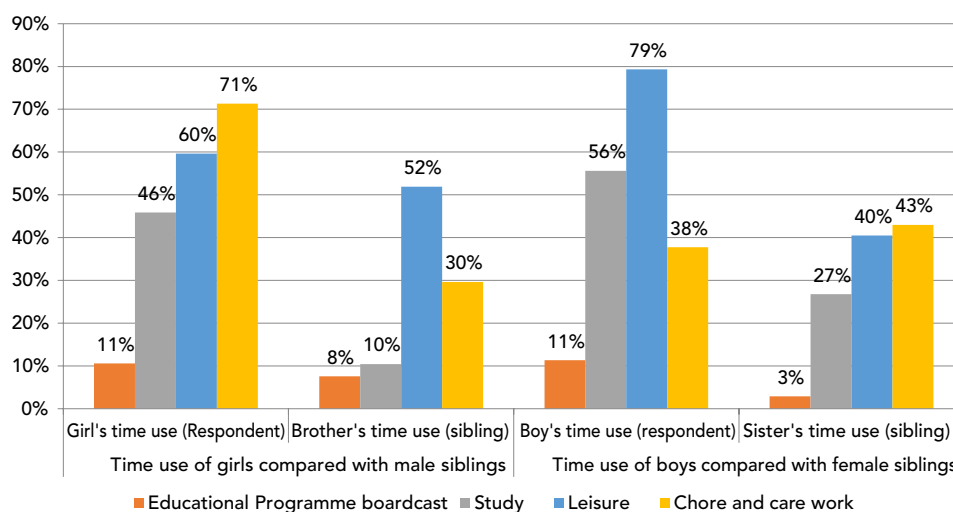


Figure 13: Intrahousehold time use: Respondents and Siblings

About 67% of the households, where the respondents were girls, reported high intra-household disparities in time use. As seen in Figure 13, 71% of the girls from these households said that they spent time on chores and care work, while only 30% of their brothers said the same. Similarly, there was disparity seen in the other 33% households of the male respondents, where more boys reported spending much time (79%) on leisure and studies (56%) than their sisters. The majority of sisters from these households reported spending time on chores and care work (43%).

²⁸ The time use pattern was determined by asking them the activities in which they spent a normal 24 hours cycle of a day. The responses were then clubbed into four main categories: (i) time spent on educational broadcast either on TV or Radio, mainly to see if the students were spending time on the televised shows based on their curriculum which many state governments like Assam and Bihar have decided to run during the period of school closure, (ii) studies other than time spent on watching educational broadcast, (iii) time spent on leisure activities like playing, watching television, surfing the internet, sleeping, spending time with family and so on, and (iv) time spent on chores and work, this category comprised of both domestic work, unpaid work in farm and care giving responsibilities which the adolescents might be engaged in.

Moving away from the gender-segregated analysis, overall, two-thirds of the children interviewed reported spending at least some time in leisure activities (66%) while 60% of them also said that they spent time in domestic chores care-work including cooking, cleaning, fetching water, work in farm, taking care of siblings and elders in the family (Figure 14). About 49% of these children mentioned spending some time in studies as well. Although, the patterns do not vary much by the states, as leisure activities stand as most common engagement in a normal day, a relatively higher proportion of children (63%) from Bihar stated spending time on education-related pursuits, UP and Telangana were at the other end, with smaller proportions mentioning that they spent any time on education (29% and 8% respectively) while most of the children saying that they spent their time mainly on chores and care work (63% and 77%).

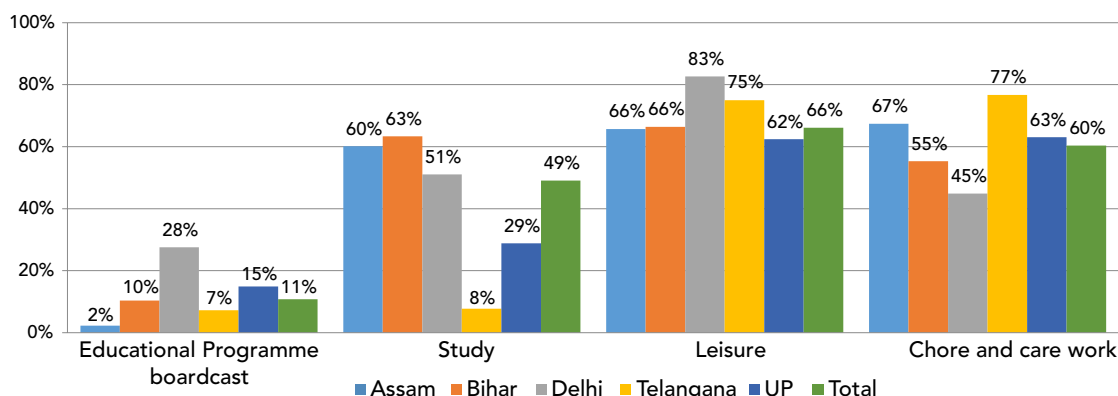


Figure 14: Time use patterns per state

4.4 Only 11 Percent Children Access Educational Telecasts

Another very critical feedback emerging from the time-use data relates to the low uptake of the mass-media based educational programmes and the presence of devices in homes not guaranteeing access. Only 11% of the children reported to be viewing / listening to educational broadcast on TV or radio. This was despite the fact that more than half (52%) of the students had a television set at home.

The access to radio was much lower, with only 18% of the students reporting to have access to the physical device. The percentage of viewing/listening to educational programmes was the lowest for Assam (2%), which also faces the issues of difficult terrain and connectivity, and was severely flooded at the time of this survey. This also establishes that the barriers to technology are multiple and not limited to the physical access to the device alone, as further reinforced by the findings analysed in the following section. While about half or more reported spending time for studies, this remained largely un-negotiated by any kind of support.

4.5 Men Control Technological Devices

Technology-based education, has widened the already existing gaps in access to education making children from marginalised sections and girls even more vulnerable than before²⁹.

²⁹ For more information refer to:

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/data/interactive/2020/03/24/world-bank-education-and-covid-19>

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/education-plus-development/2020/05/14/covid-19-in-india-education-disrupted-and-lessons-learned/>

<https://www.aiib.org/en/news-events/media-center/blog/2020/Unequal-Disruptions-The-Digital-Divide-During-COVID-19.html>

<https://thewire.in/education/online-school-education>

<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/e-learning-in-india-a-case-of-bad-education/article32672071.ece>

A staggering number of households possessed mobile phones (only 17 children out of 3176 did not have a phone at home), and yet, only 30% children reported having access to the phone at any time. Phone ownership by gender emerges as a big determinant: we found 71% of the households reporting the phone belonging to a male member. This number was highest in Telangana with 92%, followed by 80% in UP, and relatively lower in the Eastern states of Assam and Bihar respectively at 67% and 66% (Figure 15). About 45% of the children said that sometimes they had access to phones, but they needed permission to use the phone, while 18% said that they never had access to a phone. The state-wise data showed that 23% of the children in Assam and 21% in Bihar said that they never had access to phones in spite of the presence of a device at home (Table 16).

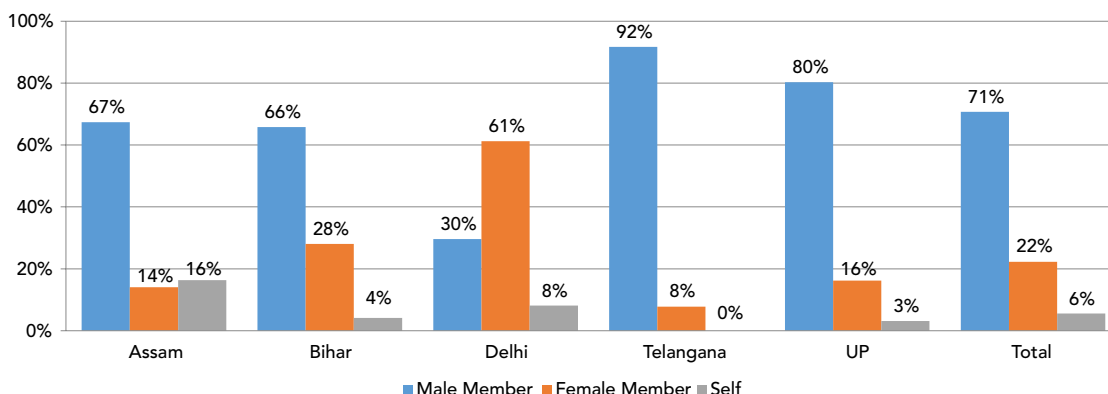


Figure 15: Ownership of Phones in the Households

Only 26% girls said that they could access the phone present in the household whenever they wanted to; the corresponding data for boys is (37%). Female phone ownership bodes well for better phone access: a greater number of adolescents could always access the phone when it belonged to a female member of the household. This could be attributed because of the possibility of the male members venturing out for work was higher than that of female members in the household, or the sheer relationship of fear, it could be easier to access mother or elder sister as compared to father or any other male relative. Nevertheless, these indicated the limited access to phones and therefore, a major hindrance in continuing education through distance mode, especially for girls.

However, when probed deeper, we found that economic constraints also acted as a big barrier.

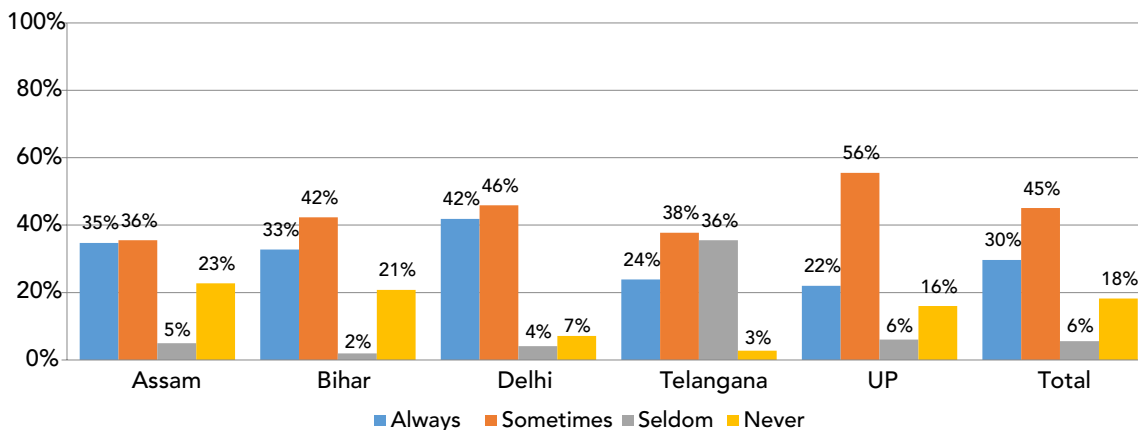


Figure 16: Access to Phones

4.6 Economic Barriers Majorly Limit Access to Internet

Children from economically-weaker households also reported relatively lower access to phones. Only 38% of such children were confident about phone access at all times, as compared to 53% adolescents from economically-stronger households. Even when the family owned a device, many families did not necessarily have the money to recharge it for regular use. Only 40% of the children reported that the phones at home always had top-up balance. This number was relatively higher for the children from Assam (53%) and UP (52%) as compared to that in Bihar (30%) and Telangana (21%).

Even having phone balance did not always mean access to internet. Less than half (46%) of adolescents said that they had access to internet; this proportion was higher in the urban areas in Delhi (88%) and low in predominantly rural samples such as in Bihar (39%). While 45% girls said that they had access to internet in comparison to 47% boys, the disparities were much wider when intersected with financial constraints faced by the household. Only 42% of the children from households with financial constraints had access to internet in comparison to 66% of children coming from relatively-stable financial backgrounds.

Access to internet also did not necessarily translate into ease with the use of internet-based-learning, as most children do not have any experience of self-learning mode. The literature on open and distance education in India has established the limitations of this mode in rural contexts (Jha et al, 2020)

There is thus clear evidence that children face multiple barriers in accessing technologically-enabled education. Even if access to the device was guaranteed, it did not always convert to internet-based learning. Gender attitudes regarding female adolescence and sexuality translate into the pandemic context as well, with sharp gender divides in case of phone access, perhaps due to fears of girls forming relationships with boys, financial constraints limiting access to internet. This has implications for policy discussions where distribution of phones and tablets are seen as a solution to the lack of access to technology-enabled education.

Also, one fears that the current situation of loss of learning opportunities might also have negative implications for the prospects of returning to school for such adolescents. The following section throws further light into this aspect.

4.7 Uncertain about Going Back to School

While the actual numbers of the children and youth who drop out will be visible only after schools reopen, we wanted to understand what children themselves perceive about the possibilities of going back to school.

It was encouraging to note that majority of the boys and girls in the study said a hopeful 'yes' (56%) when asked if they would return to schools when they reopen, with only 2% of them saying 'no'. But a considerable proportion of adolescents did not respond to this question (about 37%) pointing to looming uncertainties. The state-wise numbers show (Figure 17) that in Assam, 82% of boys either did not respond or said that they didn't know if they would go back to school. In Bihar, the numbers of boys and girls who said that they would go back to school were similar (58 and 57%) although in UP a slight difference in these numbers were seen, where a greater number of girls said yes compared to boys. In Bihar (37% girls and 39% boys) and UP (32% girls and 31% boys) similar proportion of children were uncertain about their return to school upon reopening. This implied that both boys and girls perceived the similar level of the risk of not being able to return to school.

We tried to understand this risk by associating these responses with the kind of schools they attended (public/private) and the kind of socio-economic background they came from.

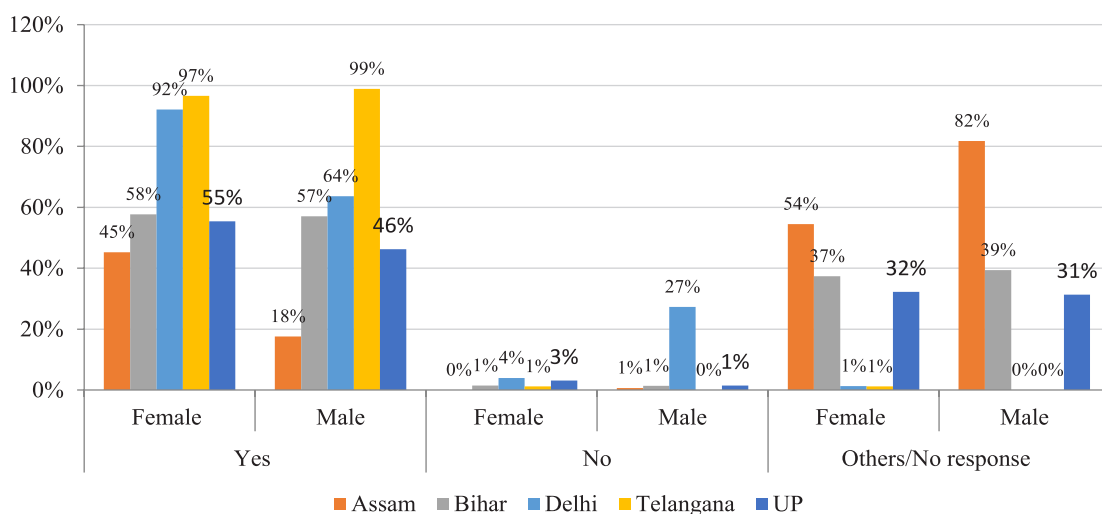
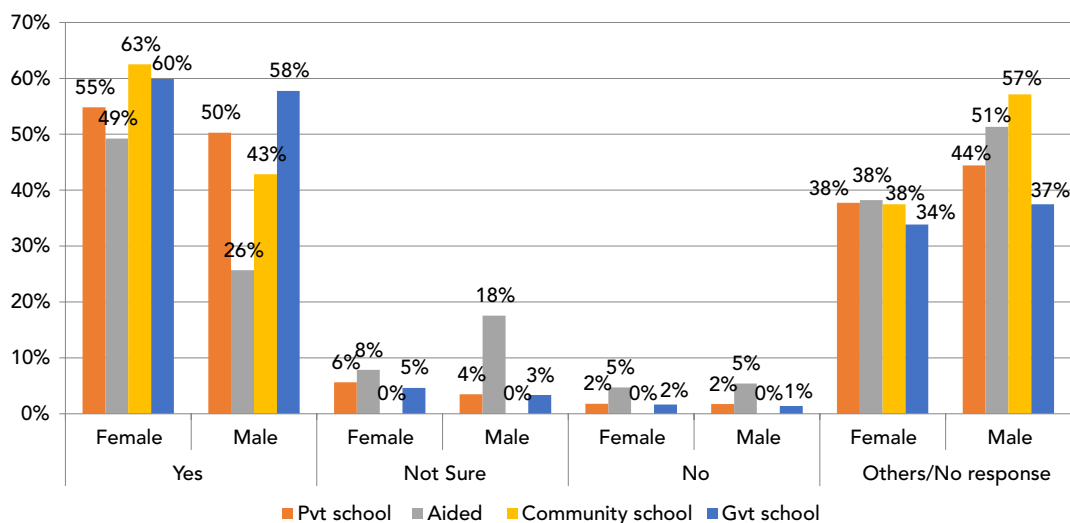


Figure 17: Possibility of going back to school - state wise

4.8 Private School-Goers face Greater Risk of not Returning to Schools

When disaggregated by types of school, the numbers for students who were ambiguous about their return was higher for those in private schools as compared to government schools (Figure 18). This could be due to several factors but the cost of school fees would definitely be one of those. While most of the boys and girls (71%) in our sample studied in government schools, the numbers segregated by gender reveals that a greater number of boys were enrolled in private schools than girls (Figure 19)³⁰.

This was especially true in UP where more than half of the boys (54%) from our sample were in private schools as compared to 41% of the girls. Even in states like Bihar where the percentage enrolment in private schools was lower in the sample with about 9% enrolment, the enrolment of boys in private schools was slightly higher than the girls.



³⁰ A small percentage of the adolescents in the sample were in private-aided schools (8%) and only 1% in the community-run schools. These community-run schools primarily included 'venture schools' and NGO-run schools in the tea estates.

Figure 18: Possibility of going back to school - school management wise

The caste/community-wise distribution showed a stronger preference for private schools among the General and OBC category households with 43% and 26% respectively choosing to enrol their children in private schools. While we have not probed for the reason for this in the study, this could be for several reasons: longer tradition of schooling among these communities and the fact that they are politically and economically upwardly mobile and aspirational groups (OBCs), or simply better placed to pay the school-fees.

A relatively higher percentage of Hindu households (20%) sent their children to private schools in comparison to 17% Muslim households. In other words, even though the total enrolment of children in private unaided schools was small (19%) in term of the aggregate percentage total, the disaggregated numbers by gender and caste show a trend where populations that were relatively privileged in terms of socio-economic capacities preferred private schools, especially for their boys.

This too has a gendered impact due to the pandemic, this time disproportionately affecting boys. It made boys perhaps more vulnerable in times of crises, as even within private schools, the boys were relatively more uncertain than girls by 6 percentage points about their return to school (Figure 18). This could perhaps be explained by the loss of livelihood and income, and consequent cash shortages that the families are facing.

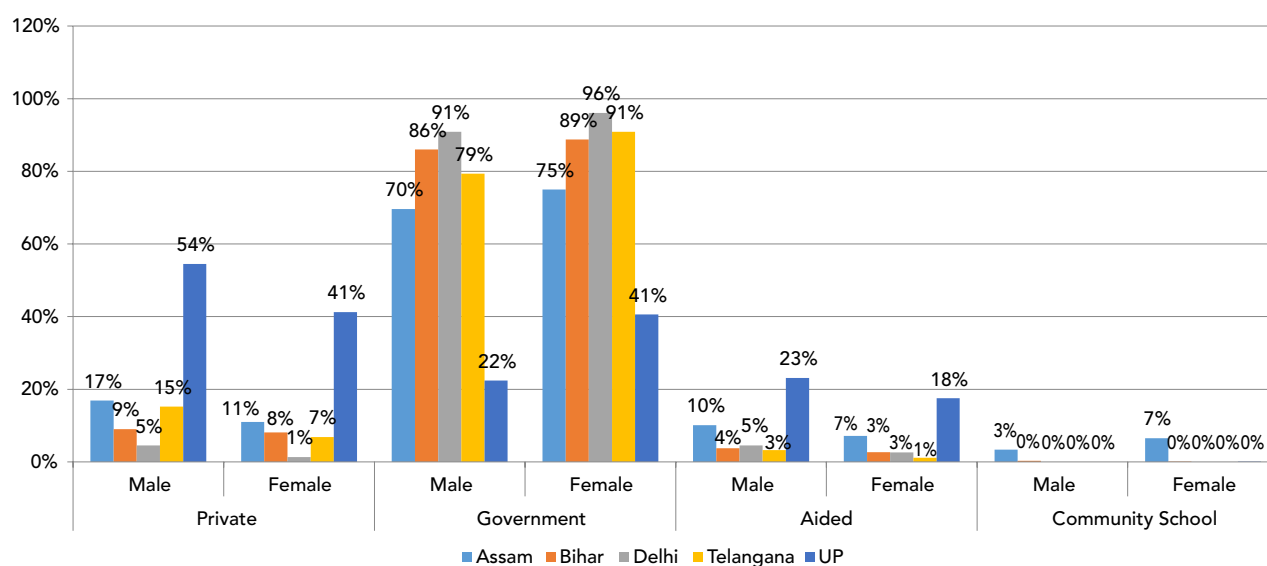


Figure 19: Educational Profile of Adolescents by Type of School and Gender

4.9 Economic Hardships May Force Children to not Return to the Schools

Our evidence also shows the economic impact of the pandemic will adversely affect return to school. Half the students from economically-weaker families reported the likelihood of returning to schools on reopening, while the corresponding figure from economically-stronger families was much higher (78% boys and 76% girls). The former also expressed uncertainties in going back to school with 44% of them not answering this question as compared to a small percentage (15% boys and 17% girls) from economically stronger households.

5. Response and Support: Inadequate to Address the Distress

In addition to containing the virus and the public health responses to address the needs of those who are directly infected by the pandemic, the most urgent need facing the country is about reviving the economy and employment, ensuring food and livelihoods security especially for those most affected, and develop a comprehensive response to the loss of education and learning at all stages of schooling. While it was too early to gauge the long-term policy and institutional responses at the time of this survey, we tried to understand whether these families and children received adequate and appropriate relief, to mitigate the impact of lockdown and loss of income on poor families.

5.1 Policy and Institutional Measures to Address Economic Distress and School Closures

Relief measures announced till the time of the survey included additional cash transfers through already existing schemes like the Jan-Dhan Yojana and the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana, food or dry ration distribution through the existing Public Distribution System (PDS). There was also creation of additional employment opportunities through the *Atmanirbhar Bharat* package which made an additional outlay of USD 5430 million for the existing Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) scheme by expanding the number of days of guaranteed employment. The government also announced 'economic packages' in tranches, which has been criticised for being inadequate in dealing with the problem of the magnitude that a country of 1.3 billion is facing³¹. In addition to these measures announced by the Union Government, a few, State Governments also announced measures of similar nature.

In the realm of education, the Government of India and various state governments announced multiple measures relating to postponement of examinations, promotion of students to the next grade without term-end examinations, and carrying out classes and other academic activities through other modes that mainly included internet-enabled classes and TV/radio broadcasts³². Students living in residential school systems and shelter homes were allowed to continue living there and various notifications were issued to ensure continuation of food and other facilities for them. This, however, raised concerns about their safety, protection and also vulnerability to health risks including greater potential of catching Covid-19³³.

³¹ <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/the-covid-19-fiscal-response-and-indias-standing/article32154153.ece>

³² <https://www.ndtv.com/education/cbse-to-promote-all-students-in-class-1-8-2204397?pfrom=home-topscroll>; <https://www.hindustantimes.com/education/students-from-nursery-to-class-8-in-delhi-to-be-promoted-to-next-class-says-sisodia/story-0xuaE1Yq33qjmFRQ0dFZcl.html>; https://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/Secretary%28HE%29_0.pdf; https://www.mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/Covid%2019_0.pdf; <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/coronavirus-outbreak-assam-teachers-asked-to-take-classes-on-whatsapp/articleshow/74745124.cms>; <https://news.careers360.com/covid-19-delhi-govt-start-classes-in-april-sms-ivr-internet>

³³ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/education/after-lockdown-students-the-worst-sufferers-in-patna-sustaining-on-chura-sattu/story-m637BKl26jwGidsoDzMedl.html>; <https://www.hindustantimes.com/education/rahul-gandhi-writes-to-hrd-minister-for-well-being-of-students/story-GU7JDMQsFb9wAyGJxqyn5J.html>; <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/supreme-court-takes-cognisance-of-condition-of-children-protection-homes-amid-coronavirus/articleshow/74946633.cms>

Since the cooked midday meal serves as one measure to ensure food and nutrition security for children, school closure also caused a food crisis in addition to the learning crisis. Following a Supreme Court order, the Union Government asked all states to ensure that eligible students either get their meals or a commensurate food security allowance, as building immunity through proper diet was perceived as an important element in the fight against the disease³⁴. A number of states including Assam issued orders for teachers to deliver midday meal ration and cooking cost to eligible students, while others decided to distribute uncooked ration to homes³⁵. A number of state governments including Delhi and Telangana also issued notifications to private schools by either barring them from collecting school fees or being more lenient by allowing them longer time to collect fees. There were reports of private schools not necessarily following these restrictions fully³⁶, and also being the first to move to online classes³⁷. Public systems also resorted to the use of specific app-based online classes and TV broadcasts including DTH channels³⁸.

With this background, we focused broadly on understanding the reach of measures linked with food and income security on one hand and on continuation of educational activities and health needs on the other.

5.2 Food Security: High Levels of Exclusion and Violation of Child Rights

India has a strong and decentralised Public Distribution System (PDS)³⁹. Eighty-seven percent of our respondent households held a ration card. In Bihar however nearly one-fourth of respondents did not possess a ration card and therefore did not have access to this free ration. In UP, the situation was even worse, with about one-third of our sample not receiving any additional ration. Assam and Telangana fared relatively better (85% and 98% respectively) reporting that they received additional ration. In our entire sample, just 2% received any additional ration without having a ration card. This was critiqued by many development economists who have been arguing for inclusion of all to avoid any hunger-death in times like this without any paperwork⁴⁰.

³⁴ <https://indianexpress.com/article/coronavirus/coronavirus-schools-shut-sc-wonders-how-children-are-getting-their-midday-meals-6319969/>; <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/provide-meals-or-give-food-allowance-to-kids-mhrd-amid-coronavirus-outbreak/story-G1cPlndPMaDamPcfXXkVOGM.html>

³⁵ <https://theprint.in/health/how-states-are-delivering-mid-day-meals-to-students-during-covid-19-school-closure/389076/>

³⁶ <https://www.educationworld.in/private-schools-disregard-govt-directive-tells-parents-to-pay-fees-for-next-academic-year/>

³⁷ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/go-for-online-classes-cisce-asks-schools/articleshow/74921007.cms>

³⁸ <https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/news/story/coronavirus-in-india-hrd-ministry-to-launch-e-classes-on-swayam-prabha-dth-channels-for-students-1657196-2020-03-19>; https://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/cbse_pr_0.pdf; <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=202214>; https://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/PR_Acedmic_0.pdf

³⁹ In a televised address on June 30, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the extension of the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY) by five months till November end, initially the scheme was meant to be for three months- April, May and June. Under the scheme announced on March 26, more than 800million beneficiaries under the National Food Security Act (NFSA), were made eligible for an additional ration of 5 kg of wheat or rice per person and one kg of pulses per household every month for free of cost. This is over and above their regular entitlement under the Public Distribution System (PDS) which includes 35 kg of food grains per month to households eligible under Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) and 5 kg of food grains per person per month to Priority Households (PHH) beneficiaries at a subsidised cost of Rs. 2 per kg of wheat and Rs. 3 per kg of rice. During April-June, 2020, several states provided the entire quota of ration for free of cost to the NFSA beneficiaries along with the additional free ration under PMGKAY.

⁴⁰ Critiqued by many development economists arguing for inclusion of all to avoid any hunger-death in times like this. (<https://www.firstpost.com/business/india-needs-more-inclusive-social-policies-as-economic-growth-fails-to-improve-quality-of-life-says-jean-dreze-4302351.html>)

The other institution to be enlisted for food distribution was Anganwadis^{41,42}. Our survey revealed that while it worked in some states like Assam and Telangana, where 83% and 64% households respectively received food through them, the reach seemed to be limited in states like Bihar (20%) and UP (18%) with only one-fifth or less households receiving food through them (Figure 20).

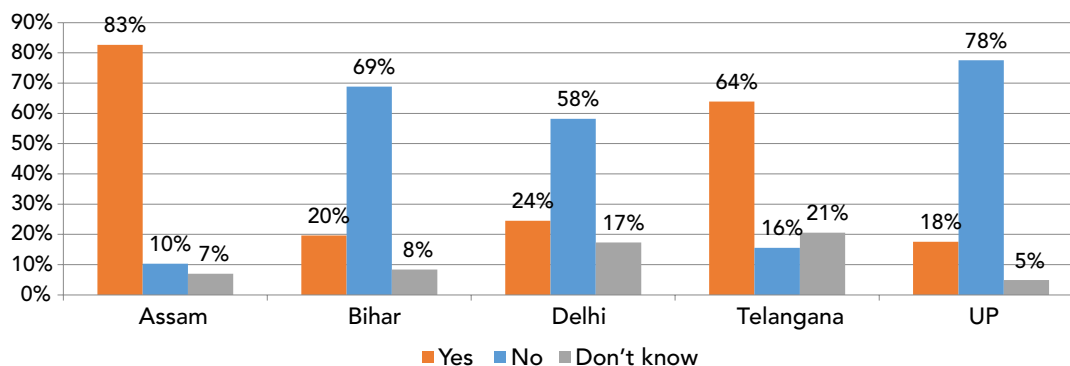


Figure 20: Meal distribution by Anganwadi Centres

Our data shows that only 12% of the children covered in our sample actually received the dry ration in lieu of midday meal. With the midday meals⁴³ forming part of the National Food Security Act, (2013), and the Right to Education (2009) in turn a part of child rights, the failure of service-delivery implies a violation of these rights, for an overwhelming majority of these children.

5.3 Cash Transfers: Majority Remained Uncovered

In the light of the pandemic and job losses, one of the announcements made by the Government was to do direct cash transfers to the beneficiaries (with advance payment in some cases) to mitigate the immediate effects of the pandemic. These were mainly through the existing central-government funded schemes and included the Jan-Dhan Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (gas), Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana and PM-Kisan Samman Nidhi among others.

As far as cash transfers are concerned, 54% of the households said that they received cash transfers into their bank account through various schemes. In UP, the percentage was lowest, as only 41% said they received any cash transfers whereas this proportion was highest in Telangana (87%), whereas a number of state government-sponsored schemes have also been operational. In addition to the Centrally-sponsored schemes the households in Telangana received cash under a special scheme announced specifically as a one-time payment for purchase of essential commodities and also under the Rythu Bandhu scheme which provide investment-support to farmers. In Assam, the cash transfers received by various households mainly included Jan-Dhan Yojana (38%) and Ujjwala (30%) schemes. Only about one-fourth of the households in both UP and Bihar received any cash transfer under the Jan Dhan Yojana, and just about 10% from the Ujjwala scheme (See Figure 21).

⁴¹ With nearly 1.5 million centres and presence in rural pockets of the country, and their pre-existing mandate to serve food to children and pregnant/lactating mothers, Anganwadis were a natural choice for pandemic-related food distribution. An Anganwadi centre (part of the Integrated Child Development Scheme-ICDS) is one of the most basic units at a village level which works towards overall maternal and child healthcare and nutrition as a part of the primary public health care system as well as functions as non-formal pre-schools. (<https://vikaspedia.in/agriculture/policies-and-schemes/rural-employment-related-1/mgnrega/rural-employment-related>)

⁴² <https://effortsforgood.org/positive-story/anganwadis-asha/>

⁴³ Universal distribution of midday meals in the school was introduced in the wake of a Supreme Court judgement in 2004

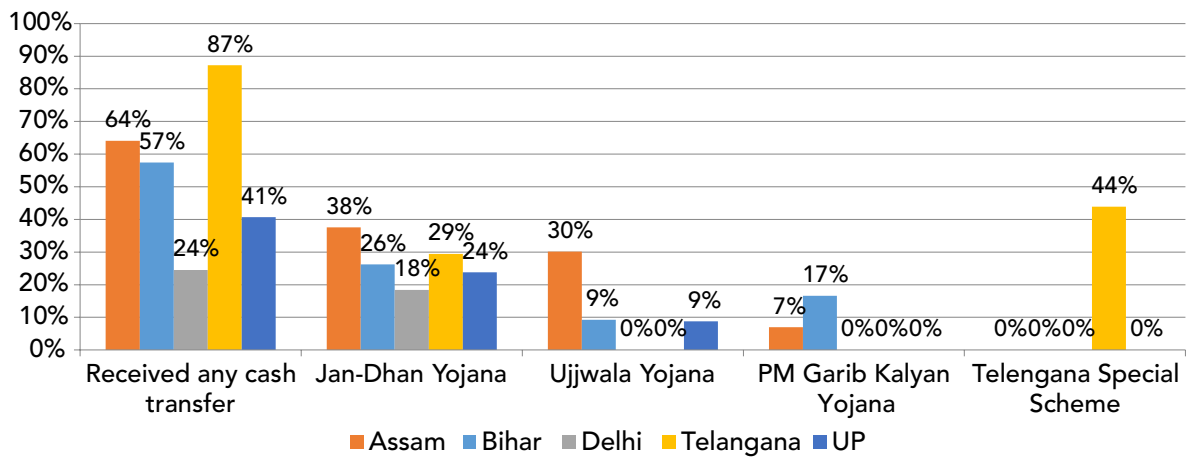


Figure 21: Cash transfers received under different schemes

A greater proportion of SC/STs (58%) and OBCs (53%) reported to having received cash transfers, in comparison to minorities (47%) and the general category (39%) in our survey.

What emerges from this analysis is that: (i) receipt of cash through any scheme remained low in Delhi (21%) and UP (41%) as compared to Bihar (57%), Assam (64%) and Telangana (87%), (ii) in most cases, these were part of the existing schemes such as Ujjwala or Rythu, (iii) the reach of the additional relief through reformed PMGYK for Covid-19 was extremely limited with no presence in three states and miniscule presence in Assam and Bihar, (iv) the reach of Jan-Dhan Scheme where women received a total sum of additional Rs. 1500 (USD 20) in three equal monthly instalments of Rs.500 each⁴⁴ as Covid-19 relief was also extremely limited with only about 18-38% household receiving this amount, and (v) families were better-placed in states like Telangana where the state government announced its own measure of cash transfer for Covid-19 relief.

It was clear that the large sections of the marginalised groups still remain excluded even under the highly publicised and celebrated Jan-Dhan Yojana and the JAM trinity⁴⁵, which were imagined as a pioneer for financial inclusion. The average balances in these accounts are low and there are a significant proportion of inoperative accounts and access to credit from formal sources is still not as envisioned (Sinha, D., & Azad, R., 2018). And, these barriers become a major limitation in times of crisis as they are the modes used for transfer of relief measures.

5.4 Education Department's Response: Limited and Largely Insignificant

We tried to understand if the Education Department was providing any kind of support either in cash, kind or in any other form such as providing alternative education, to keep the children from dropping out of school and found out that the reach has mostly been limited and largely insignificant.

Only 31% of our respondents said that they received any kind of support from the Education Department in their respective states. Assam performed much better with 56% of them having received some kind of support and UP much worse with just 7% receiving any kind of support from the Education Department.

⁴⁴ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/banking/finance/banking/centre-credits-rs-500-each-to-over-4-07-crore-women-jan-dhan-account-holders/articleshow/74973340.cms?from=mdr>

⁴⁵ JAM trinity was envisioned as a way to plug gaps in delivering direct benefits to the poor, by directly transferring the benefits to their Jan Dhan bank accounts by identifying them through the biometrics recorded in Aadhar

The different kinds of support included cash transfers for stipend and scholarships to purchase uniform (11%), ration (uncooked food, 12%) and purchase of text books (5%). Only 10 girls mentioned receiving sanitary napkins from the Education Department and not a single child reported receiving any supplements. This is clear that these are not viewed as essential items. Lack of essential iron and vitamin supplements given the high percentage of anaemic population in India also disproportionately affects children from marginalised populations, pushing them further towards ill-health.

As discussed earlier, while most state governments such as Bihar, Assam⁴⁶, UP and Telangana started telecasting school-curriculum-based lessons for free on TV, only 11% in our sample of 3176 children reported accessing these.

5.5 Government Support beyond Cash and Education: Varied Experience

A large proportion of households (85%) said that they received some kind of support from the government in terms of food and supplies. This was fairly high for Bihar (92%) and UP (91%) while it was just 44% for Telangana. The most commonly-distributed items received by the households included food, cooked or uncooked – 85% in UP, 68% in Assam, and 42% in Bihar. Bihar was the only state where a large percentage received masks (81%) and soaps (81%) although the health bulletin and the governments’ publicity for the need of compulsorily wearing masks and regularly washing hands with soap to prevent contracting the Covid-19 virus was everywhere. There was a meagre distribution of sanitisers or medicines in some states (Figure 22).

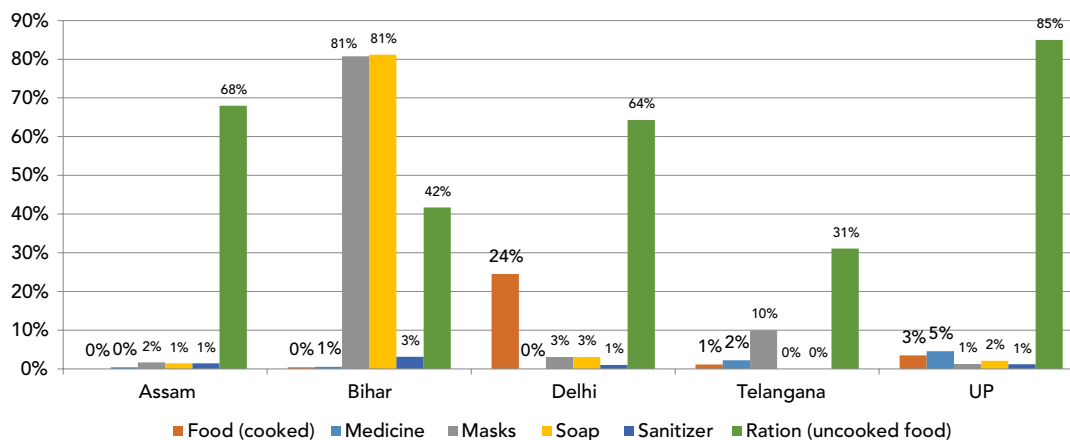


Figure 22: Support received from Government Departments

5.6 Support from NGOs and Civil Society

We found that about 45% of families received some one or the other form of support from the civil society organisations, this proportion being the highest in UP (56%). This proportion was low in other states: just 38% in Bihar and Telangana each said that they received something from these sources. The items being distributed included masks (23%), sanitizers (23%) and soaps (27%). Some of the households (14%) also received by giving health related information, some in UP also received personal care items like toothbrush, toothpaste, towel, comb and sanitary napkins.

⁴⁶ The government of UP has started online classes on TV for students enrolled with Uttar Pradesh Secondary Education Board from 18th August 2020. The government of Telangana started Doordarshan Yadagiri channel and T-SAT Vidya Channel for the same purpose from 1st September 2020.

6. Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

While the Covid-19 curve keeps rising in India, leading to high uncertainties, the socio-economic impact of the pandemic is slowly becoming more visible, in terms of shrinking of GDP, high unemployment, rise in mental health issues and deepening of disparities for the most vulnerable.

As people get adjusted to the 'new normal' induced by Covid-19, it is pertinent for policy makers to view the pandemic not only as a health crisis but also to understand its economic and social aftermath in terms of loss of livelihoods and employment, declining food-security and disruptions in schooling which in turn could lead to higher incidences of school drop outs, child marriage and child labour.

This study gives us critical feedback on three major aspects the impact of the pandemic and Lockdown: (i) on the food, income and livelihoods, (ii) on education and (iii) the reach of the policy and institutional responses to mitigate the distress. Considering that the numbers are varying and the sample selection is guided by the presence and reach of partner NGOs, the findings can be taken as more representative of the situation that exists for the marginalised sections of the society in Bihar and UP, it could be more indicative of the sample per se in Assam, Telangana and Delhi. Here, we discuss five major conclusions followed by a few broad recommendations while the state specific analyses and suggestions have been presented in the next section.

6.1 Major Conclusions

1. *Notable income and employment loss leading to food, cash and livelihood crises with severe implications for children's education*

These families have experienced severe income and employment loss, made worse by the fact that half or more households also depended on at least one member from the family migrating to urban areas, and that source drying up due near total halt of economic activities and the job losses caused by the shrinking of the economy. Those working in unorganised sectors are the worst affected as compared to those in agriculture, especially if they own land. However, land-ownership is very low when it comes to SC/ST families, making us realise that caste intersects to make the impact worse for those at the bottom of the ladder. More than 85% households in Bihar and UP reported absence of any employment opportunity while the situation was slightly better for those working in tea-gardens of Assam due to early opening up of plantation work. However, cash crunch was near universal in the post-lockdown phase, leading to food-shortages. The distress, therefore, has been severe forcing families to change their food-patterns and in extreme cases, even go hungry.

This has implications for children's lives made evident by their assertion that life was better before the Lockdown when they could go to school, meet friends, eat hot midday meals and learn. Almost half of the children interviewed expressed uncertainty about returning to school with this percentage being much higher for families experiencing cash-crunch, and therefore, hinting at possibility of unaffordability of schooling and also the need to join work-force to support family income, as was also revealed by some of the field notes by researchers in UP and Bihar.

2. *Inadequate relief measures with very limited reach; violation of right to food*

Although a number of measures were announced, the reach has been limited, largely explained by the low coverage of the schemes through which the relief was being delivered. While those with a ration card mostly received the additional ration they were supposed to, a considerable proportion (one third in UP and one fourth in Bihar) did not even have a ration card. Even though the reach of food distribution was one of the better as compared to other items of relief, the distribution of ration in place of midday meals seems to have been very poorly executed as only about 12% reported having received it. This is indeed a violation of both the Right to Food, also covered in the constitutionally guaranteed Right to Education. Only about 20-40% of families reported receiving the additional cash transfer was meant to reach families in distress through Jan Dhan Yojna, the main vehicle for the cash transfer scheme. Telangana did better with its own scheme for cash transfers, including one meant for post-Covid-19 distress, reaching a larger proportion of families. Very small proportions reported receiving any cash transfer from the respective Education Departments.

3. *Education related interventions grossly under-accessed due to multiple barriers faced by children from marginalised groups*

Only 11 percent of children reported spending anytime on watching any education related telecasts and while nearly half of these children reported spending some time in studies, it largely remained unnegotiated by any support. An overwhelming majority of girls reported being engaged in care work and domestic chores, which was much less for boys, though they also reported being uncertain about their return to school in equal measure. Private school goers faced greater probability of non-return because of non-affordability and a greater number of boys were attending private schools. This meant that those using public system perceived themselves as having higher chances of returning to school.

4. *Violation of right to education and high potential of widening disparities in education*

Lack of adequate and suitable measures to address the educational needs of children from vulnerable communities – such as those in this survey – is tantamount to violation of the Right to Education. Reliance on only technology-enabled solutions for continuation of education can lead to widening of already existing disparities in education in India. The study made it clear that while phone ownership is limited, the potential for its use as a tool for learning is further so, due to various reasons: unaffordability of internet, poor connectivity in remote locations, lack of knowledge in using technology, non-conducive surroundings and lack of access to written materials, and lastly, lack of access to the device itself, especially in case of girls.

5. *Gendered impact of the pandemic may reverse the gains made in gender parity in education and empowerment unless addressed comprehensively*

Two major findings clearly point to gendered impact of the pandemic on girls' education: high engagement in domestic chores and care work, and low access to phones for learning even if the family owns one. The gender disparity in both of these is high and when combined with pre-existing social norms where girls' education is already devalued, this could result in majority of these girls not being able to return to schools when they reopen. Although such information is beyond the scope of our survey, the reports of early-marriages have been surfacing from various parts of the country⁴⁷.

⁴⁷ <https://inbreakthrough.org/covid-19-early-marriages/>

Structural barriers of caste along with an education system not known for being inclusive makes children more vulnerable by limiting their chance at an education and in turn, social and economic mobility. Therefore, the system must gear up to ensure that such groups of children are adequately supported through responsive and inclusive policy measures. Some of these are suggested below.

6.2 Major Recommendations

1. ***Inclusive and responsive methods to enable continuity in education while adhering to Right to Education*** – The data from this study and the discourse on digital divide clearly shows that high-tech distance models are not the solution for reaching the most deprived instead they have the potential of widening the existing gaps in education. Therefore, the need is to explore and integrate the possibilities of low/non-tech interventions that are cost-effective and accessible to all.

In addition, policies should also give adequate thought to the medium of engagement, that is, address structural barriers like caste and gender. This can only be done by engaging with parents, communities and local organisations that work towards gender parity and equitable access to education. With the economy being in shambles, the proactive engagement of parents in their child's education might be more of a challenge than anticipated, but it must be overcome by involving grass root stakeholders into the policy-making and implementation process.

It is imperative that the government moves away from a one-size-fits-all policy perspective to a democratic, flexible approach that works in convergence with local authorities, different departments, front-line workers civil society organisations and communities to come up with sensitive policies calibrated as per local needs.

It is important to link feedback mechanisms and adequately respond to raised concerns once the policies are implemented. All stakeholders should be provided with adequate mechanisms to register their feedback on what works and what doesn't. In addition to this, a response loop should be attached to the feedback to ensure that suggestion and grievances by all stakeholders do not go unnoticed and are responded to. This will ensure substantiality of interventions and create accountability through checks and balances. This feedback loop should also be designed based on the principles of inclusion and responsiveness; presence of a website where anyone can write is not necessarily an inclusive feedback loop in the Indian context.

A policy can be called responsive and inclusive only if it responds to the specific needs and existing barriers faced by people it is targeting and ensure their inclusion both in the process and outcomes. How it can be unpacked for different states is a matter of detailing that can be decided through state specific discourses. This discourse also needs to ensure that the Right to Education is being adhered to both in word and in spirit.

2. ***Decentralised and contextual pathways for smooth transition to school reopening*** – Even though the government has decided to partially open schools, with the continuous surge in cases, it is not definite as to how the plan will work. In most parts of the country, the current school infrastructure does not support the normative requirements of social distancing, regular washing of hands and more so, continuous wearing of masks. The rural and urban scenarios, varied types of schools are very different from each other and the government must account for diversity of the sector and refrain from a centralised approach to school reopening.

3. ***Adequate support to teachers*** – Teaching in India – especially in the private sector, the non-permanent cadre of teachers in the government sector, and also the permanent cadres in a number of states – is highly feminised. This means that structural barriers that prevent access and use of technology-based distance education for children and youths also present the same obstacles for the teachers. Adding to this is the double burden of domestic and care work. Therefore, policy makers must consider the gender divide that further adds to the digital divide even for teachers while making policies that support continuation of learning through distance mode. A flexible and localised approach based on innovative methods of teaching and learning will go a long way. Recent reports have also suggested that most teachers in private schools have faced huge pay cuts or job losses.

The government must intervene to ensure security of jobs and adequate compensation for the efforts of teachers. The support services may include appropriate training to handle alternative ways of teaching and establishing relationships with students including having a different set of expectations from them, as well as mental health support services for teachers.

4. ***Build safeguards for preventing adverse fallout of the family's economic distress on the child's education, work and marriage*** – Families in distress often take recourse to child marriage and child labour, it is of urgent importance that both government and civil society organisations take a strong and effective preventive approach.
5. ***Build back better and reimagine education for all*** – The reopening strategies should take into account how underprivileged children have suffered learning losses to ensure an inclusive access to quality education. This should be supported by studies and research on learning gaps, remedial and bridge courses, and calibration of curriculum to make up for the loss. Teachers need to be trained accordingly and supported adequately to ensure smooth implementation of this approach. This is an opportunity to build back schooling and that responds to the most marginalised.

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Appendix

Table 1: Number of respondents by State and District

State	District	Number of Households
Assam	Dhubri	76
	Jorhat	74
	Kokrajhar	181
	Lakhimpur	77
	Tinsukia	76
Bihar	East Champaran	199
	Fatuha, Patna	50
	Kishanganj	97
	Muzaffarpur	204
	Nalanda	200
	Patna	342
	Rohtas	123
	Samastipur	255
Telangana	Adilabad	50
	Sangareddy	26
	Vikarabad	53
	Yadadri Bhongiri	51
UP	Ambedkarnagar	28
	Ayodhya	15
	Faizabad	84
	Hamirpur	41
	Hardoi	100
	Kanpur	20
	Kushinagar	335
	Lucknow	20
	Moradabad	200
	Sultanpur	1
	Raebareli	100
Delhi	East Delhi	98
Grand Total		3176



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