The Effect of the Covid-19 Pandemic and Economic Distress on Education: A View from the Margins

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SHORT REPORT

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This short report is based on the fourth of the five-webinar series conducted by Centre for Budget and Policy Studies on Impact of Covid 19 on children, livelihoods, economy and education including the response mechanisms adopted for the same.

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Acknowledgements

This short report is based on surveys conducted by the Centre for Budget and Policy Studies (CBPS) in three phases during different stages of the pandemic, the first in April – May 2020, the second in July-August 2020 conducted on behalf of Champions For Girls' Education on the impact of Covid-19 on the lives and education of children in India. The third one was conducted between June – September 2021. We acknowledge the contributions of all the field investigators, Ranjeeta Sinha, Dheeraj Kumar for conducting telephonic surveys during all the three rounds and Syed Mazahir Husain who joined them for door-to-door surveys during the third round. The second round of survey was a part of a larger India study initiated by Malala Fund and India Champions for Girls' Education done in association with many partner organisations who have been duly acknowledged here and we reiterate the same again.

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

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List of Abbreviations

BMP	Bihar Mentorship Project
CBPS	Centre for Budget and Policy Studies
GST	Goods and Services Tax
KV	Kendriya Vidyalaya
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NV	Navodaya Vidyalaya
OBC	Other Backward Classes
PDS	Public Distribution System
SC	Scheduled Caste
SCHOOL	School Children's Online and Offline Learning
ST	Scheduled Tribe
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

1. Background

Two years into the pandemic and counting, India has already witnessed three waves of the Covid-19 pandemic. All three phases have been different in nature, but have one central similarity: all of them have brought about an unprecedented Emergency in Education, at least, in post-Independent India. The devastations of the first wave, which started in March 2020 was triggered not by a medical emergency but a political decision that imposed a sudden nation-wide lockdown, one of the strictest in the entire world, and had devastating consequences on the most marginalised groups in the country. The country was still reeling from the first wave, when the second wave (from April 2021 to July 2021) hit, creating an acute medical crisis with a high loss of lives, livelihoods, and long-term social and economic effects. Moreover, these two waves had a spiralling downward effect on the economy which was already in distress.

One of the major areas of impact has been in the area of Education. India, unlike any other country (with the exception of Uganda), has refrained from allowing children physical access to schools. The country has seen one of the longest periods of school closure, except for the respite of a few months in between the second and the third wave, where schools were momentarily open for a few grades. Even these open periods were with severe restrictions such as alternate days of schooling and other guidelines. While the third wave of the pandemic has not been severe in terms of its impact on health, it has had continued impact on educational prospects of children, as it heralded another round of school closing. It is indeed agonising to note that schools have been the first to close and the last to open in India, when it should have been the opposite. This begs the question: who bears the brunt of these long-term closures?

The answer to this question is both simple and complex. The simple answer is that almost all children in the school going age have suffered due to the loss of schooling irrespective of their socio-economic background. But it is also true that it is the children from the most marginalised sections in the country with low socio-economic capital have suffered the most and disproportionately so, as the pandemic has impacted almost all facets of their lives. We already know that long periods of school closure push children from deprived sections into labour, sexual and labour trafficking, early marriages and long-term drop outs from school (Dove et al.,2020; Denney et al., 2015; UNDP, 2015; Selverbik, 2020; Santos & Novelli, 2017). Studies conducted in India, over the past two years of the pandemic have also indicted the same. In fact, an early estimate of UNESCO in the year 2020 suggested that about 140

million students in primary and 130 million students in secondary have been affected by the multiple lockdowns in India. It is against this background that this paper seeks to understand the impact of the pandemic on a group of more than 700 children studying in 9 government schools from two districts of Bihar – Muzaffarpur and Patna over a period of 1.5 years of the pandemic.

2. Context of Study

Centre for Budget and Policy Studies (CBPS) had been engaged in an action research programme called the 'Bihar Mentorship Project' (BMP)[1] in the aforementioned 9 government schools plus one NGO run school in Bihar since April 2018. The objective of the project was to co-create an empowerment-based mentoring module for adolescent boys and girls with a focus on critical pedagogy. The schools were carefully chosen to ensure two things: (1) the participants of BMP (children and community members) belonged to socio-economically marginalised sections, and (2) the schools were typical government schools in peri-urban (Patna) and rural (Muzaffarpur) Bihar. This profile allowed us to explore several dimensions at once. On the one hand, we were working with schools that had greater representation of girls from marginalised communities with limited support from their households, but we were also working with school who were not necessarily able to provide adequate support, as they themselves struggle with resources like lack of basic infrastructure, human resources, to name a few.

Through the BMP, we primarily interacted with the children in their schools through two mentors (posted in each of the districts), but we also had regular contact with their families and communities. But any contact established came to a standstill when the first lockdown was announced and the schools were closed in March 2020. Given that we didn't necessarily have a physical space to engage with the children and understand their situation, we tried contacting them through their mobile phones and other social networks. This effort to engage with the children that was initiated in the tough circumstances of the first wave of Covid, culminated in three rounds of survey corresponding with each successive Covid-19 pandemic wave. Moreover, each wave of our data collection corresponded to the changing social contexts of the pandemic itself.

For instance, the primary objective of the first round of the survey was to understand children's access to phones, so that we could continue the mentoring processes. Conducted in April to May of 2020, it was a quick telephonic conversation that the mentors had with the children and their parents/guardians on the basis of a short questionnaire. The results from this survey highlighted the limited access to children that we had in times of school closure, as we could contact less than half the students (only 42%) through telephones.

[1] http://cbps.in/education/empowerment-based-mentoring-model-for-adolescent-girls-action-research-in-bihar

The second round, which took place in July-August 2020, corresponded with the end of the first wave of the pandemic in India. This round was a part of a larger 5 state study[2] that CBPS undertook in partnership with the Education Champions Network of the Malala Fund. The objective of this round was to understand the impact of the first wave of Covid-19 on the lives of adolescent boys and girls. The methods used to collect data for this second round were mixed - data was collected both telephonically and through in-person interviews. These mixed methods were used to allow for more flexibility in data collection, taking into consideration the ease and convenience of the diverse field partner organisations. The data that was collected by CBPS for the households and children from our schools (the aforementioned 9 government schools) continued through telephonic methods, primarily because of restrictions on travel within the field. The questionnaire was designed in such a way that it could allow for both methods of data collection. One child and one adult (parent/guardian) from every household was interviewed. Interestingly, the same questionnaire was used to conduct similar studies in Nigeria and Pakistan by Malala Fund.

The last round (round three) of the survey was conducted in June-September 2021 just after the second wave had settled and cases had started to plateau. This round of the survey was guided by two motives: (1) since the second wave had seen untold loss of lives and livelihoods, it become extremely critical for us to understand the impact of this wave on the lives of children and (2) this round enabled us to look at the stage-by-stage impact of the pandemic, through a comparative frame on the same set of children whom we had been following since the past three years.

The third round of the survey also used a mixed method, but this time the intent behind using the mixed method was different. We had realised by the end of the two rounds of survey that it was only a limited set of children that we could reach through phones and a large number of children remained outside the purview of our research. Therefore, we decided to have a round of telephonic survey with those who we could access through phones. For those, who remained unreached through phones, we decided to conduct an in-person survey with them.

[2] http://cbps.in/wp-content/uploads/Report-Final-1.pdf

Table 1: Sample size and methods used for all three rounds of survey

Round Name	Method of survey	Sample size
Round 1	Telephonic	319, Male -110, Female -209
Round 2	Mixed methods when held across the five states, but did telephonic for our intervention areas	245, Male - 80, Female – 165
Round 3	Mixed method in-person, telephonic and both.	569, Male -207, Female – 362

Source: Round 1 (during first wave) data collected between April-May 2020, round 2 (post first wave) data collected between Jul - Aug 2020 and round 3 (post second wave) data collected between Jun - Sep 2021

3. Access to children and linkages with marginalisation

It is interesting to note that those who were unreached through telephones in the third round of the survey were those who primarily belonged to weaker socio-economic strata of the society; hence, lending evidence to the discourse that the most marginalised had the least access to phones and access to children from these communities was difficult if only technological modes were used. We used caste and mother's education as two proxy indicators of marginalisation. As seen in tables 2 and 3, the data clearly shows that in Muzaffarpur, where our Children and Parents were predominantly residing in the rural areas, a large number of children belonging to Muslim, Other Backward Classes (OBC) and Scheduled Caste (SC)/Scheduled Tribes (ST) communities could not be accessed through phone calls, but only through in-person visits to their households for the survey. In case of mother's education, Muzaffarpur presents a similar case, where children belonging to households where mothers had had no education, were much difficult to access over phone. However, as the mother's education increases, the access to children through phones also increases. This is true for both Patna and Muzaffarpur.

Table 2: Access to children based on caste

District	Method of Survey	General	MUSLIM	OBC	SC/ST	Grand Total
Muzaffarpur	Telephonic	33%	43%	33%	30%	33%
Muzaffarpur	In-person	67%	57%	67%	70%	67%
Patna	Telephonic	75%	72%	69%	63%	68%
Patna	In-person	25%	26%	27%	36%	30%
Patna	Mixed	0%	1%	4%	2%	2%

Source: Round 3 (post second wave) data collected between Jun - Sep 2021

Table 3: Access to children based on mother's education

District	Method of Survey	No Education	Some schooling up to 5th Standard	Between 6th and 8th Standard	Between 9th and 12th Standard	UG college or UG Degree	Grand Total
Muzaffarpur	Telephonic	26%	39%	40%	48%	50%	33%
Muzaffarpur	In-person	74%	61%	60%	52%	50%	67%
Patna	Telephonic	61%	80%	74%	63%	100%	68%
Patna	In-person	34%	20%	26%	35%	0%	30%
Patna	Mixed	5%	0%	0%	2%	0%	2%

Source: Round 3 (post second wave) data collected between Jun - Sep 2021

In addition to this, the subsequent rounds of survey also showed that the access to children through phone was neither consistent nor stable. That is to say, that even if we could reach a particular child telephonically in the first round, we could not do the same for the other rounds of survey. In fact, we could telephonically reach only 16 % of the children from our total sample of 757 in all three rounds of the survey (see table 4) over a span on 1.5 years. Thirty five percent of the children could be contacted only once, out of which the contact could mainly be established through in-person visits. This made cohort analysis extremely difficult as the children formed a floating population with unstable access.

Table 4: Access to children using various methods of survey

Access to children	Unreached	Once	Twice	Thrice	Grand Total
Unreached	18%	0%	0%	0%	18%
Door-to-door	0%	22%	0%	0%	22%
Telephonic	0%	13%	18%	16%	46%
Telephonic and door-to-door	0%	0%	9%	4%	13%
Grand Total	18%	35%	27%	20%	100%

Source: Round 1 (first wave) data collected between April-May 2020, round 2 (first wave) data collected between Jul - Aug 2020 and round 3 (second wave) data collected between Jun - Sep 2021

It needs to be pointed here that the process of telephonic survey was extremely cumbersome, not just because it is difficult to conduct surveys of this nature over phones and the interviewer has to be highly trained. It is because the method in and of itself does not allow for relationships to be formed, so as to elicit more complete information. For example, it was rare for us to establish contact with the child or interview the parents/guardians with just one phone call. The mentors had to call multiple times to seek appointments if the calls connected. Parents would mostly be outside the household earning their livelihoods. Oftentimes, phone connections were unstable and due to insufficient balance, network issues, and constant changing of phone numbers, accessing children even for the limited time that we required proved challenging. This inability to reach children through the means of the telephone provides a rich insight into the marginalisation and exclusion of children from not just 'technological' spaces, but from the larger social and educational spaces as well. A deeper look into the profile of the households that these children belonged to makes this clear.

4. History of Marginalisation

One needs to go deeper into the segregation present in the education sector in India to understand the context of marginalisation and its connection with schooling. The growth of private schools in India, pushed by the increasing demand for English medium education, has resulted in increased segregation amongst the school going populations (Kar and Sinha, 2021). One may argue that there are different kinds of private schools that exists in the country and therefore, if we consider low fee charging private schools, or missionary schools, for example, the children going to such schools could come from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. But such is not the case with government schools anymore, except for schools like Kendriya Vidyalaya (KVs) or Navodaya Vidyalaya (NVs). But KVs and NVs are not typical government schools, as there is a high level of government spending in these schools. A typical government school, on the other hand, tends to be poorly resourced, has students primarily from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and disproportionately represented by girls. This last characteristic of a typical government school is because parents often prefer to send their children, especially boys to private schools, primarily because of the social, economic and cultural mobility associated with such institutions (Maitra, et.al 2014). Such is the case with the children from our sample also.

Almost 90% of the children in our study belonged to OBC, SC, ST and Muslim households. These communities have limited social and economic capital and have traditionally remained disadvantaged for generations. This becomes even more clear when we look at the occupational profile of the parents, where 75% of the fathers worked in the un-organised sector as daily wage workers in construction, as rickshaw drivers, factory workers and so on. Almost half (49%) of the mothers were engaged in unpaid domestic work and about 39% of them were employed in the unorganised sector. Therefore, the parents of most of these children had highly unstable jobs with no fixed or assured income, indicating extremely vulnerable families.

When we examine the educational qualifications of the parents, it is not surprising to see that the educational qualifications of the parents were low, with about 27% of the fathers and as high as 43% of the mothers being non-literates. About one-fourth of the fathers and 26% of the mothers had received education up till elementary, indicating that most of the children in our sample were first generational learners. This has multiple implications. Firstly, schools are perhaps, a critical (or the only) avenue for socio-economic mobility for these children. Secondly, without schools, the children had limited support at home to continue their education because of the

absence of a literate environment at home. Thirdly, the economic distress at the household meant that some of these children would have to drop out in order to support their homes financially, or contribute towards care work. Fourthly, schools, through the mid-day meal schemes were an important source of nutrition, and the school closures meant that they probably had insufficient food with the required nutritional supplements that are important for their growth and well-being. This nutritional deficit is also likely to have increased because of the instability and precarity of their own family income and sustainability. The following section add further context to these arguments.

5. Intensification of Marginalisation

"*Subah khayen toh shaam ko nahin, shaam ko khayen toh subah nahi*" (Survey, September 2021, Muzaffarpur). This is one of the responses that we received from one of the mothers in Muzaffarpur when we asked whether the household was facing any cash shortage. The statement lays bare the precarious existence of these households where even one meal for the day had become difficult during the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. As high as 81% of the households surveyed during the latest round (round 3) told us that they were under economic distress. The long term and worsening economic distress brought about by limited support and lopsided policy decisions was clearly visible as more number (8% higher) of families reported facing cash shortages in the third round of survey as compared to the second round (see table 5). The data also showed that the situation was worse in Patna, with almost 85% households reporting economic distress; this again was 11% higher than the previous round of survey.

Table 5: Percentage of households that reported cash shortages

	Percentage of households facing financial distress	
District	**Round 2**	**Round 3**
Muzaffarpur	73%	77%
Patna	74%	85%
Grand Total	73%	81%

Source: Round 2 (first wave) data collected between Jul - Aug 2020 and round 3 (second wave) data collected between Jun - Sep 2021

In order to cope with this shortage, especially in an economy with unemployment rates soaring high, the households had to resort to borrowing money. Here again, when we compared the data on borrowing for the last two rounds of survey (Round 2 and 3), we found that the percentage of households who resorted to borrowing money as a coping strategy had increased by 7 percentage points (see table 6), so much so that almost all households (almost 93%) reported cash crunch, and were borrowing money in Muzaffarpur. Even more distressing was the fact that most of these households in Muzaffarpur borrowed money from informal sources like local money lenders at a high interest. The pandemic, therefore, had trapped most of these households in a cycle of indebtedness as opportunities for employment shrunk and food inflation increased.

Table 6: Coping Strategies adopted by households

	Round 2			Round 3		
District	**Borrowed**	**Ate basic food**	**Sold assets**	**Borrowed**	**Ate basic food**	**Sold assets**
Muzaffarpur	52%	46%	2%	93%	4%	3%
Patna	59%	43%	5%	34%	89%	11%
Grand Total	56%	44%	4%	63%	48%	7%

Source: Round 2 (first wave) data collected between Jul - Aug 2020 and round 3 (second wave) data collected between Jun - Sep 2021

Table 7: Coping Strategies adopted by households

	Percentage of households facing food shortages	
District	**Round 2**	**Round 3**
Muzaffarpur	81%	56%
Patna	74%	14%
Grand Total	77%	35%

Source: Round 2 (first wave) data collected between Jul - Aug 2020 and round 3 (second wave) data collected between Jun - Sep 2021

We know that cash in hand has direct linkages with food security and therefore when asked if the households were also facing food shortages, more than half (56%) of the households in Muzaffarpur said 'yes' (see table 7). But these shortages were mitigated by the third round - the aggregate number of households reporting food shortage in the latest round of survey when compared to the second round of survey had reduced by almost 42 percentage points. This severe food shortage we witnessed in the second round could potentially be the result of two primary factors. Firstly, the second round of survey which took place in the months of July-August 2020, was done after the long period of lockdown in India which took place from 25 March to 31 May 2020. The suddenness and lack of preparedness of this move had resulted in large scale economic distress, especially for daily wage workers and those employed in the unorganised sector, like the households in our sample. Secondly, as a result of the distress caused by this lockdown, the government decided to supply extra ration to such families through the Public Distribution System (PDS). Around the time of the third round of the survey, almost all households (91%) reported to be beneficiaries of this extra ration scheme, reducing their food shortages by the time we interviewed them.

While noting these trends, it is important to note that the lack of food shortages is not the same thing as meeting nutritional requirements of the family. Almost 48% of the households in our survey reported eating only basic food (see table 6). Many mothers reported how the consumption patterns of the households had changed and had to be adjusted to minimal. "*Sirf gehun aur chawal se kaise kaam chalaye*"? How do we survive with only food grain? (Survey, 2021, Muzaffarpur). This question by one of the mothers in Muzaffarpur to the survey team sums up the food insecurity that the households were pushed into.

Additionally, when asked what were the biggest obstacles faced by the households during the pandemic, an overwhelming majority (81%) of the households expressed economic distress due to loss of wages, unemployment and lack of employment opportunities. They spoke about the long periods of lockdown with no money and food, and their uncertain futures, as their marginalisation intensified and prospects for education of their children seemed bleak due to the learning loss that many of their children were suffering (see table 8).

Table 8: Biggest obstacles faced during Covid-19 during Round 3 (second wave)

District	No obstacle	Learning loss	Economic difficulties	Food shortage	Fear of Covid-19	Don't know / Others
Muzaffarpur	7%	8%	80%	3%	5%	6%
Patna	11%	15%	82%	13%	8%	6%
Grand Total	9%	11%	81%	8%	7%	6%

Source: Round 3 data (second wave) collected between Jun - Sep 2021

In the following section, we probe deeper into these anxieties related to the future of the children expressed by the parents/guardians by further unpacking the connections between the marginalisation, economic distress and its impact on the education of children.

6. Status of Children and Impact on Learning

The children in our sample were in class 7 and 8 when the pandemic started, the closure of schools meant that by the time these children were ready to transition from elementary to secondary, the children had no regular schooling for two years, which left them unprepared for secondary education. The economic distress caused by the pandemic and the uncertainty of school reopening meant that many children had to drop out of schools in order to support their families. Around the time of the third round of the survey, i.e., June- September 2021, secondary schools had reopened for regular classes. We found that almost 90% of the children from our sample had taken admission in the secondary schools – this is definitely a good sign. But this also meant that about 10% of the children had dropped out of school, which was much more than the percentage of children who had said that their likelihood of going back to school, during the second round of the survey in the months of July-August 2020 (see table 9). This meant that in a matter of a year, the situation of the children worsened and what was a probability of less than 2% dropping out, resulted in about 10% drop out. The situation in Muzaffarpur was even worse, where about 12% children had not enrolled themselves in secondary schools.

Table 9: Probability of return to school vs enrolment

District	Round 3		Round 2	
Muzaffarpur	Enrolled	87%	Definitely Yes	97%
	Drop Out	12%	Probably Yes	1%
	No response	1%	No	2%
Patna	Enrolled	91%	Definitely Yes	91%
	Drop Out	8%	Probably Yes	8%
	No response	1%	No	1%

Source: Round 2 (first wave) data collected between Jul - Aug 2020 and round 3 (second wave) data collected between Jun - Sep 2021

7. The Condition of Girls and Lack of Freedoms

One of the most striking visuals during the field work was seeing the remnants of marriage celebrations in the form of empty pandals in the villages. When we further investigated, we found that the marriage ceremony had been conducted for one of the girls in our school. She was not the only one. During the course of the third round of survey, we found that 21 girls from our sample had already been married. In fact, some of them had been married immediately after the closure of schools during the first wave of the lockdown and during the time of the last survey, they were already nursing their first born. Evidence from various studies suggests (Jejeebhoy, 2021; UNICEF, 2021) that due to the uncertainties and hardships brought about by the pandemic, the parents were keen on marrying their daughters. Adding to this was the fact that a lot of young men who were migrant workers had returned to their villages during the first lockdown and their families looked for suitable brides. This further pushed up the rate of child marriages in Bihar and other states in India that saw a reverse migration of youth from cities back to their villages. For the girls, this meant leaving behind their dreams of higher education, and instead moving to a different life of domesticity and care work. Most of them were not happy about the added responsibilities of marriage and child care, and were anxious about their futures since their freedoms related to education and mobility had been abruptly snatched away from them. "*Ab toh meri shaadi ho gayi, bacha bhi ho gaya, school kaise jaaun*?" (I am married now, I also have a child, how do I go back to school?) (Child interview, Patna 2021)

The scope of the study allowed us to capture only a limited number of early marriages, and one cannot dismiss the possibility of underreporting here. Also, the actual number of drop outs amongst girls would only be evident after schools have fully started and resumed normal functioning. Nevertheless, this did indicate a crisis in continuation of education for girls and warrants further in-depth studies.

What made the situation of girls even more precarious was the burden of domestic responsibilities which increased due to the closure of schools. The time use data from third round of survey collected from the girls showed increased time poverty for girls as 79% of the girls reported spending an inordinate amount of time on chores and care work. This number when compared to the number of boys who reported the same is disproportionately high as only 38% of the boys said that they participated in household chores and care work. This not only pointed towards the gendered distribution of work at the households but also suggested that the burden of work had taken time away from studies for girls when compared with boys. The data showed that even though 75% of the girls said that they spent time in studies,

this number was as high as 84% for the boys. Only 5% of the girls spent time playing with their friends. Similar trends were visible in the round two of the survey also. The effect of girls disproportionately spending time on household work and being mostly confined to their homes throughout the length of pandemic-induced school closures potentially means not only a heavy toll on girls' physical and mental health, but also their future educational prospects (see table 10).

Table 10: Time Use

		Round 3			Round 2		
District	**Gender**	**Play**	**Studies**	**Chores and Care work**	**Play**	**Studies**	**Chores and Care work**
Muzaffarpur	**Male**	27%	80%	42%	37%	96%	44%
	Female	6%	64%	76%	14%	86%	88%
	Total	15%	71%	62%	20%	88%	77%
Patna	**Male**	25%	90%	34%	34%	89%	51%
	Female	4%	86%	81%	16%	86%	95%
	Total	12%	88%	64%	23%	87%	79%

Source: Round 2 (first wave) data collected between Jul - Aug 2020 and round 3 (second wave) data collected between Jun - Sep 2021

8. Technology-based Education and Linkages with Intensification of Marginalisation

A significant part of the story of marginalisation during this pandemic period is the spectre of online education. The myopia visible in policies that advocate for the great equalising force of technology-based education has been revealed through data which indicates that only 1% of the children watched educational broadcasts on television, despite the fact that almost half had access to a television set at home. For girls, watching these broadcasts was even more difficult due to time poverty and the clash between the time of the broadcasts with their domestic responsibilities. Access, therefore, is determined not necessarily by the presence of a technological device.

The girls in our study also faced similar barriers when it came to accessing telephones. Less than half of the girls (47%) who were surveyed in the third round said that they had unhindered access to a phone. The number of boys who reported the same was slighted higher at 53% (see table 11). This number when compared for both rounds of survey, points to some critical facts. Firstly, access to technology like cell phones remains low for marginalised sections of the population in India. This is evidenced not just by the low percentages of access across genders and across the two rounds of survey but also by the fact that the percentages of boys and girls who reported unhindered access during the second round of survey further declined during the third round. This finding is especially useful if we keep in mind that we were able to access more marginalised populations during the third round because of the use of mixed-methods (see table 11). Secondly, even though access remains low for the entire group of population, the gendered nature of access cannot be refuted. The girls had lower access than boys throughout the two rounds of survey and the data also showed that technology was always controlled by a man within the household, which further hindered access for girls.

Table 11:Access to Phones

		Round 3					Round 2				
		Always	Sometimes	Rare	Never	No Response	Always	Sometimes	Rare	Never	No Response
Muzaffarpur	Male	72%	23%	3%	2%	0%	67%	4%	30%	0%	0%
	Female	66%	21%	4%	6%	2%	43%	19%	35%	3%	0%
	Total	69%	22%	3%	5%	1%	49%	15%	34%	2%	0%

		Round 3					Round 2				
		Always	Sometimes	Rare	Never	No Response	Always	Sometimes	Rare	Never	No Response
Patna	Male	33%	0%	66%	0%	1%	60%	11%	26%	0%	2%
	Female	30%	0%	65%	0%	5%	56%	10%	31%	0%	3%
	Total	31%	0%	65%	0%	4%	57%	11%	29%	0%	3%
All	Total	50%	11%	35%	2%	2%	54%	13%	31%	1%	2%

Source: Round 2 (first wave) data collected between Jul - Aug 2020 and round 3 (second wave) data collected between Jun - Sep 2021

Needless to say, continuation of learning during the period of school closure suffered greatly for both boys and girls, especially given the context that most of these children were first generational learners with no or limited access to technologically supported education. Therefore, for those who could afford spending out of pocket for their children's education, sent their children to coaching institutions. Interestingly, coaching centres have a deep penetration in urban and peri-urban Patna and they were functional even during the periods of school closure. So, it was not surprising to see that 62% students in Patna relied on coaching institutes for studies (see table 12). The number of boys who went for coaching was significantly higher than the girls (71% boys vs 57% girls). The numbers also showed that reliance on coaching had substantially increased over the pandemic for both Muzaffarpur and Patna, but overwhelmingly so in Patna (see table 12).

Table 12: Support with Studies

		Round 2					Round 3				
District	Gender	Self	Coaching	Male Member	Female Member	Friends and Neighbours	Self	Coaching	Male member	Female member	Friends and neighbours
Muzaffarpur	Male	4%	13%	9%	10%	3%	16%	16%	67%	38%	2%
	Female	9%	19%	21%	26%	4%	12%	15%	62%	44%	3%
	Total	7%	16%	16%	20%	3%	14%	15%	64%	41%	3%
Patna	Male	4%	32%	21%	20%	4%	5%	71%	33%	35%	2%
	Female	9%	19%	15%	23%	4%	14%	57%	19%	24%	4%
	Total	8%	24%	17%	22%	4%	11%	62%	24%	28%	4%
	All	7%	20%	16%	21%	4%	12%	39%	43%	35%	3%

Source: Round 2 (first wave) data collected between Jul - Aug 2020 and round 3 (second wave) data collected between Jun - Sep 2021

During our field work, we also found cases where children did not take admission in secondary schools because they felt that they could cover the 'learning loss' due to school closure better in coaching institutes rather than relying on the bridging programmes offered at the schools. When we looked at the Bihar Government's circulars related to school re-opening, we found that the Government planned for a three-month programme as bridging. Studies done on learning loss during the pandemic like the SCHOOL survey, 2021 talks about how learning loss is not a simple loss of having lost 'time', but also has multiplicative effects. Children long deprived from schooling or learning contexts not only miss out on where they should be, but they may have also lost what they previously had understood or learnt. This compounding effect means that the nature of deprivation cannot necessarily be dealt with via bridging which only focuses on the time currently lost.

Long periods of school closure and intermittent school opening also caused multiple disruptions in learning for the children and their behaviour in terms of regular school attendance. For example, a child who would be in class 1 at the beginning of the pandemic in 2020 would now be at the end of the academic session for class 2. This means that the bridging effectively needs to address learning loss for two academic years which is unrealistic to achieve in three months. The data from round 3 showed than only 11% children had gone to schools regularly when they were opened for a short time between the first and second wave of the pandemic. About 33% could not even recall the number of days they had gone to school (See table 13) thus indicating that unplanned and intermittent school opening can be as disruptive as long periods of closures of schools for children.

Table 13: Attendance in schools between 1st wave and 2nd wave

District	Gender	Did not attend	< 1 week	1 - 4	4 – 8	Don't remember / No response
Muzaffarpur	Male	24%	0%	29%	8%	34%
	Female	30%	0%	33%	9%	24%
Patna	Male	8%	7%	37%	12%	30%
	Female	9%	1%	32%	14%	41%
Grand Total		18%	2%	33%	11%	33%

Source: Round 2 (first wave) data collected between Jul - Aug 2020 and round 3 (second wave) data collected between Jun - Sep 2021

9. Economic Deprivations and Impact on Education

Clearly, the economic distress caused by the pandemic had affected the education and future prospects of children. While most children (91%) from households that did not face any cash or food shortages during the pandemic had enrolled into secondary schools, the same was not the case with children from households facing economic deprivations. About 10% of children from households that reported economic distress had not enrolled in secondary schools (see table 14) while only 2% of children from these households had reported the probability of dropping out in round 2 of the survey. This suggests that it is possible that the economic conditions of the households had probably worsened over the period of our study.

Boys also indicated that the main reason for not enrolling in secondary school was because they had to work to support their families, who were in precarious economic situation. Some of the boys from Patna who wanted to continue their education had already started to juggle both school and work. These boys went to school in the morning and worked in the evening and told us that this was the only way in which they could continue their education. Hard as their condition was, perhaps the same choices and freedoms were not extended to the girls in their position.

Table 14: Economic distress and linkages with drop outs

	Round 2			Round 3		
	Definitely Yes	**Probably Yes**	**No**	**Enrolled**	**Drop Out**	**No response**
Households reporting economic distress	92%	6%	2%	89%	10%	1%
No food or cash shortage	97%	0%	3%	91%	6%	3%
Grand Total	93%	5%	2%	89%	10%	1%

Source: Round 2 (first wave) data collected between Jul - Aug 2020 and round 3 (second wave) data collected between Jun - Sep 2021

10. Conclusion

In summary, this study indicates to three critical concluding points - : (1) the educational situation is different for children who are marginalised - they face a historical and infrastructural deprivation along with a social one, (2) this influences both girls and boys, but girls bear a brunt only because they are girls - boys have the 'option' of juggling, but girls are given no choices, and (3) this pandemic showcases what was already wrong with the system - and no amount of technological intervention can fix it. When the system is broken, it requires systemic changes, and not haphazard make-do ones.

During any situation of emergency or crisis, it is usually the poor who bear a disproportionate share of the impact and loss that is experienced. In the recent years, demonetisation and GST had broken the spirit of the country and the economy was just grappling from the faulty and poorly implemented government policies with a heavy cost paid by the poor[3]. Now, in between the two waves of the pandemic and the entire period in the middle which was riddled with uncertainties, it has done lasting damages undoing years of efforts by nations to bring people out of poverty and head towards sustainable and equitable economic development essential for which is a just and egalitarian education system. A recent study by Azim Premji University titled the 'State of Working India 2021 – One year of Covid-19' has estimated that about 230 million additional people are now below the minimum wage poverty line mainly due to income shocks. There is always a disproportionate burden on women during such dire crisis with increasing care work and pushing more of them out of employment due to the informal nature of their work. Girl children also get more affected as they are expected to drop-out of school to care for their younger siblings and get involved in household chores.

There has been inaction on the part of the Government and apart from providing ration and food grains, it was not really doing much to mitigate the suffering of marginalised people leave alone making sensitive policy stringent policy measures in order to address the issues of access to education, learning losses and other supportive measures like provision of mid-day meals and entitlements that children need in order to overcome the disruptions caused by the pandemic.

Hence, it is time for us to advocate strengthening of social protection through strong policy measures which do not look at ad-hoc or one-time measures but takes a long-term perspective of growth, development, and overall well-being of society. The

[3] https://www.cprindia.org/news/7178

time is not for austerity measures as policies need to take care of the pressing needs of the current times by providing cash in the hands of the people to create multiplier effect and boost aggregate demand, invest more in the improvement of education and health systems for the development of capabilities of our young population and build long term resilience in the society. This paper presents the case of Bihar alone, but does find resonance in conditions of populations from most marginalised sections from other parts of India as well.

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