Shutting schools, increasing digital divide

Written by Administrator
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By Sidharth Mishra

The schools and colleges in the national Capital were once again shut last week by the Delhi government on the pretext of the Supreme Court order on pollution. Though in the very next hearing Chief Justice NV Ramana said, "We've observed, don't know whether it's intentional or not, some sections of media try to project we are villains and we want the closure of schools. You had said we were closing schools and introducing work from home. And see today newspapers!"

The court's observation once again reiterated the fact that for the Delhi government the easiest thing to do is to shut schools in the name of "concrete steps taken to control pollution." How can a functioning school add to pollution and a functioning industry will not is something for the Delhi government to explain.

In these columns we had discussed how we are denying the child the opportunity from learning after being kept in cloisters for almost two years on the account of Covid-prevention protocols. The government keeps claiming about us being a software superpower and everybody being digitally connected. Claims aside, the huge fact is that digital divide in our country remains wide and has only increased.

The Delhi government says they have digitally connected the households in the city but this claim came a cropper during the lockdown as children from a majority of the households could not connect for the online classes.

According to a report by policy think tanks LIRNEasia and Indian Council for Research on International Economics Relations (ICRIER), against 84 per cent of the households in the capital having internet connectivity only 25 per cent of enrolled in schools had access to education during the first lockdown of 2020. While Delhi government may claim that the city did better than the national average, the fact also is that states like Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra, despite a lower percentage of households with internet connectivity, close to 40 per cent of children enrolled in schools could access education.

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The survey proves beyond doubt that a majority of our students are not equipped for online education. This is largely on account of digital divide.

To buttress the point, we may refer to a report from UNESCO, which mentions, "School closures carry high social and economic costs for people across communities. Their impact however is particularly severe for the most vulnerable and marginalized boys and girls and their families. The resulting disruptions exacerbate already existing disparities within the education system but also in other aspects of their lives."

The report further adds, "Schooling provides essential learning and when schools close, the disadvantages are disproportionate for under-privileged learners who tend to have fewer educational opportunities beyond school."

A public interest litigation has been made in the Delhi High Court asking the Centre and the AAP government to provide free laptops, tablets or mobile phones to poor children so that they can access classes online during the lockdown. Faced with such digital divide, the last thing the government should be doing is the closing down of the schools on one pretext or the other.

Another major aspect is that shutting down the schools hit productivity. In a city like Delhi, with several household having working parents, one may have to miss work when schools close in order to take care of their children. This results in pay cuts and impacts productivity negatively.

One should also not forget that the schools are centres of social activity and human interface. When schools close, children miss out of on social exchange that is essential to learning and development. Closures adversely impact their mental well-being.

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