

COVID - 19 and Disparities in India : An Analysis

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Abstract

COVID-19 has been no less than a nightmare for the world. No community or person was left unaffected. The impact of the coronavirus pandemic can be seen in different sections of society, but this impact has not been uniform for all. The current pandemic has amplified the inequalities that were somehow already deep-rooted across the globe. For a country like India too, where inequalities had been acting as impediments for individuals and communities, preventing them from playing pivotal roles in social, economic, and political life, the emergence of the coronavirus pandemic has widened these inequalities. The present paper studied the disparities in India, amplified during COVID-19, considering some important sectors like health and education that played a crucial role in building the country's social infrastructure. Also, other variables like income, GDP, poverty, unemployment, and gender inequality have also been taken into consideration to understand the intertwined and magnified impact of the coronavirus pandemic on widening the socio-economic gap. This paper found that in India and many parts of the world, efforts to move towards self-reliance is the right approach, as the same would help us reduce inequalities by creating employment and incomes.

Keywords : COVID-19, disparity, socio-economic gap, social infrastructure, income inequality, gender inequality

JEL Classification Codes : D63, I14, O15, O16, O18

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Social and economic exclusion exists in every country. Such exclusion often puts some sections of society in a disadvantageous position. The disadvantage is often based on social identity, which may be across dimensions of gender, age, location, occupation, race, ethnicity, etc. (The World Bank, 2020). The opportunity to lead a better life gets converted into the form of inequality due to such exclusion. According to the definition given by the Cambridge dictionary, inequality can be described as “the unfair situation in society when some people have more opportunities, etc., than other people.” In simpler words, United Nations describes it as “the state of not being equal, especially in status, rights, and opportunities.” This term 'inequality' is quite wide and can be interpreted in many ways, but for the sake of better and simple understanding, it can be broadly classified into two categories, namely, social inequality and economic inequality. Both kinds of inequalities are entwined as unequal participation in one aspect often leads to unequal opportunity in another aspect. For instance, inequality arising due to gender-based gaps will affect the earning opportunities available for the oppressed gender. Social inequality, in simpler words, can be described as the disparity due to the unequal distribution of societal resources based on some social norms related to gender, age, class, race, ethnicity, caste, power, etc. On the other hand, economic inequality is the disparity based on the uneven distribution of income and wealth.

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Disparities in India

If we look at India in general, there are distinctive forms of inequalities prevalent in the country. India's inequality is driven by limited upward mobility due to unequal opportunity (Ghatak, 2021). World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report* (2021) ranked India at 140 among 156 countries. This rank has been assigned by considering important dimensions of social life, including educational attainment, health and survival, economic participation and opportunity, and political empowerment. Such a lower rank indicates a huge disparity between both genders. Gender disparity across India results in unequal opportunities in the field of education and health, and becomes a hurdle in the country's overall economic and political development. The impact of such inequality can be seen in the lives of both genders, but women are at the most disadvantageous position. One of the critical issues concerning gender disparity is the inequality in pay, which is economic inequality. If we really want to have an equal status between both genders, then the focus must be on addressing the gender wage gap in India. According to the *Global Gender Gap Report* (2021), India ranked 135 among 156 countries on the parameter of equal wages for similar work. The two prominent areas where improvement is needed are the education system and the job market. In order to diminish the pervasive gender wage gap in India, the country's educational and occupational discrepancies between men and women need to be addressed (Tang et al., 2021). Another issue associated with gender inequality is the unequal distribution of farmland between men and women. According to India Human Development Survey, farmland owned by women in India is just 2%, while women's participation in the total agricultural labor force is about 42%.

The education of children in India is also being impacted by the presence of disparities in society. Children who belong to oppressed caste, class, and gender don't get their equitable share in the education system of the country. Also, geographical differences make it difficult for learners in remote areas to attain quality education at reasonable rates. Another factor contributing to increased education inequality in India has been the rapid growth of private schools (Pal & Ghosh, 2007). As these schools serve the needs of the richer sections of society, thus their rapid growth indicates education disparity in society. Expansion of the school network has been affected under the Right to Education Act, 2009, but due to inadequate infrastructure, dropout rates are quite high. Indian girls still have lower rates of completing their school education, and the major concern is safety. Accessible and good quality education is obstructed by such differences.

Even the healthcare sector is not untouched by the inequalities in the country. According to Martin Luther King Jr., of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane (Lee, 2016). The health inequities in India are shaped by region, socioeconomic development, and by class, religion, caste, and gender (Ravindran & Rao, 2018). Due to the rural-urban divide, people in rural areas don't have access to better healthcare facilities in comparison to those living in urban areas. However, the situation is not that much appreciable in the urban areas too, when it comes to the plight of slum dwellers. Poor and marginalized sections of society are always at risk of losing their lives because of a lack of good quality healthcare facility available at the right time. Inadequate water, sanitation, and hygiene services in India's health facilities contribute to the high neonatal mortality rate, which is currently 20 deaths per 1,000 live births. Most girls have to drop out of school in their adolescence because of poor sanitation and hygiene facility. Due to unequal income distribution, good quality healthcare facilities are unaffordable for the poorer sections of society; thus, it becomes a privilege for those who can afford it.

Income and Consumption Inequalities in India

The uneven distribution of income and wealth is yet another noticeable form of inequality present in India. India has seen a continuous rise in economic inequality since 1983–84. If we look at the inequalities of wealth, income,

Table 1. Recent Trends in Consumption Inequality

Year	All-India Gini	Consumption Shares of the Bottom 20%	Consumption Shares of Top 20%	Consumption Shares of Top 10%
1983	0.30	9.0	39.1	24.7
1993–94	0.30	9.2	39.7	25.4
2004–05	0.35	8.5	43.9	29.2
2009–10	0.36	8.2	44.8	30.1
2011–12	0.37	8.1	44.7	29.9

Source : Himanshu (2022).

and consumption in India, these inequalities were high in 1951, which decreased over the next two and a half decades, but after that, they remained almost constant for the next one and half decades, increasing continuously after 1991. If seen, the share of the bottom 20% of the people was 9.00% (total consumption) in 1983–84, which decreased to 8.1% in the year 2011–12; whereas, the share of the top 20% increased from 39.1% (total consumption) in 1983–84 to 44.7% in 2011–12. The stake of the top 10% in total consumption improved from 24.7% in 1983–84 to 29.9% in 2011–12 (Table 1).

According to Oxfam International, 77% of the total national wealth is owned by 10% of the Indian population ; 73% of the total national wealth generated in 2017 went to the wealthiest 1%, while 67 crore Indians, who comprise the poorest half of the population, saw only a 1% increase in their wealth (Himanshu, 2022). These numbers make an addition of economic inequality in a society that is already fragmented by the differences of caste, gender, religion, and region.

Disparities Amplified by COVID-19

The past two years have been the years of the pandemic. Since the disease is contagious, so social distancing is required to contain the spread of infection. Stringent lockdowns were imposed across the world. There was a massive shutdown in every country and also in India. All educational institutions were closed in India, and transport and hospitality services were suspended. Government offices were shut down, and other commercial and industrial activities were halted as a part of lockdown measures. While the COVID-19 pandemic unleashed unprecedented outcomes, affecting public health, livelihoods, the economy, and our way of living, the impact was exacerbated by the lockdown measures (“COVID-19 - Examining the impact of lockdown,” 2021). There is growing evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic has been associated with negative impacts on the income and health of the poor within low and middle-income countries like India (Gupta et al., 2021). The coronavirus pandemic's negative outcomes amplified the inequalities present in Indian society.

Education and healthcare are two important sectors for the development of social infrastructure in the country. Both sectors have been adversely affected by the pandemic along with stringent lockdown measures in the country. If we look at the country's education sector, this sector has not received as much attention so far as it has to be in measuring the pandemic's impact on students' learning process. The effect of the pandemic on the education sector is yet to be measured, however, all indications show that it will be very damaging for overall human resource development. Due to restrictions on various activities, schools and colleges were closed. Online learning was introduced in place of physical classrooms. Despite this rapid transition to e-learning, millions of children in Africa and South Asia have been left without adequate education access. This has been primarily due to the lack of internet facilities and digital infrastructure in these countries. In India, the situation turned out to be severe. The

Indian society, which is already divided by the differences of caste, class, gender, and region in providing equitable, accessible, and quality education to all, another divide was brought by the pandemic, which is the 'digital divide.'

Digital Divide

Although this digital divide already existed in India in pre-pandemic times, the sudden emergence of the coronavirus disease exposed systemic inequality. The absence of good digital infrastructure in India created an obstruction in the teaching-learning process. Inadequate digital infrastructure brought the challenge of disparity in access to electricity, internet connections, and devices like computer or smartphones to the fore. During the COVID period, lack of awareness was stated as the most important factor for not adopting virtual classrooms. This was so because of network issues, lack of training, and doubts regarding the worth of virtual classes (Arora & Srinivasan, 2020).

The National Sample Survey conducted its 75th Round of sample survey on household social consumption related to education (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation). Their survey found that only 4.4% of rural households had an electronic gadget, namely a computer. In urban areas, this percentage is 23.4%. Only one in 10 households across India have an electronic gadget, whether a smartphone, desktop, or laptop. Only 14.9% of rural households have internet connectivity, and 42% of urban households have an internet connection. But having an internet connection is not enough to conduct a smooth teaching-learning process.

Digital Literacy, Knowledge Gap, and Gender Gap Analysis

Digital literacy is another prominent issue associated with it. The percentage of Indians above the age of 5 years having basic digital literacy is just 20%, and 40% for the age group of 15 – 29 years, including all high school and college students. Also, there is a regional disparity in access to digital infrastructure. In the national capital, 55% of households have access to internet facility. Other states include only Kerala and Himachal Pradesh, where more than 50% of homes have internet facility. In Odisha, only one out of 10 households has internet access. Karnataka and Tamil Nadu are software hubs, but internet penetration is less than 20% even there. Economic status in society plays the biggest role in creating a digital divide. NSS divides the population into five equal groups, also known as quintiles, based on per capita expenditure per month. In Odisha, 63% of households in the top urban quintile have internet access. But in the poorest quintile in rural Odisha, only 2.4% of homes have internet facilities. Also, electricity is another problem as there are frequent power cuts in rural areas.

The Ministry of Rural Development surveyed villages across India, namely Mission Antyodaya, and they found that the percentage of households in India receiving electricity for less than 8 hours is 20%. Only 47% of households receive electricity for more than 12 hours. There is a gender divide in Internet users' profiles, which is more evident in rural areas. States like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Delhi have a greater percentage of female internet users. Organizations have conducted surveys like the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), Oxfam, and Azim Premji Foundation, and found that about 30% to 60% of students were not able to attend the e-classes due to various factors, which include unavailability of devices, shared devices, and unaffordability of data packs. Thus, these are the issues connected with online learning and also accompanied by improper management of resources by government schools, as poor children in India depend upon these schools for their education. Online learning is not only unviable; it's also an unfeasible choice for the majority of the Indian population due to inaccessible and unaffordable conditions of digital infrastructure in India. Also, reduced household income and lack of social protection have pushed kids of low-income families to leave their education aside so they can contribute to the family. Also, even those learners who can access and can afford electronic

devices and digital facilities might not get a proper and disciplined learning environment that hampers their learning capacity. If policymakers see online learning as an opportunity that we can make out of a crisis, it may cause children of socially and economically deprived sections to lose further on education. In such a case, online education will only act as a tool to further accentuate the knowledge divide, thus widening the economic disparity.

This pandemic has affected the Indian education system severely, which could result in high dropout rates, and due to the gender divide, girls may be more vulnerable for this emerging situation. In the year 2021, on National Girl Child Day, a briefing was given by National Right to Education Forum's policy, and according to them, about 10 million girls in India may drop out of schools and colleges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the RTE forum, 1.6 million girls in the age group of 11 – 14 years are out of school. The pandemic will further exacerbate this risk of dropping out by putting girls at risk of early marriage, pregnancy at an early age, increasing violence against them, trafficking, and poverty. The impact is not only confined to the education sector but a huge disparity can be seen in the job market regarding the gender wage gap. The pandemic has unleashed a multi-dimensional negative impact on the economic stability and resilience of vulnerable and marginalized social groups such as women, more so in developing countries with a socio-cultural background that tends to hinder women's entry and participation in the labor market (Arora, 2022). According to the *Global Gender Gap Report* (2021), India is among the countries with the largest gender disparity in economic participation and opportunity. Female participation in the total labor force declined from 27% in 2010 to 22% in 2020 (Global Gender Gap Report, 2021). During the lockdown and months after, while 61% of men remained employed and only 7% lost employment, only 19% of women remained employed, and a vast 47% suffered a permanent job loss (Arora, 2022). During covid, women quit the workforce because most worked in the informal sector. This sector has no resilience against adverse situations even though it makes them more vulnerable and keeps them in poverty.

Despite adverse circumstances related to economic activities, employment, health, education, and society, the governments at all levels, the Centre and the States, performed extraordinarily well, and economic activities rebounded quickly. Apart from this, the most appreciated act of the Central government was distributing free ration to nearly 80 crore people. Though the impact of the pandemic was obviously on the poorer sections of society, in-kind subsidies, especially food rations, helped reduce their miseries.

Recommendations and Solutions

In nearly two decades, we have seen attempts to deal with inequalities centered on making legislations to compensate those left-outs from the growth process. It was recognized that even after experiencing unprecedented growth of GDP, we could not bring the desired improvement in the quality of life of the people, as reflected by Human Development Indices and also India's international ranking in human development. Not only did our growth remain jobless, but our achievements in literacy, health, nutrition, shelter, etc., also remain far from satisfactory. The belief that GDP growth can automatically solve the problem of employment, poverty, hunger, nutrition, etc., was belied miserably. This was the failure of the conventional trickle-down doctrine, appreciated by Prof. Jagdish Bhagwati in his book, *Why Growth Matters*. The approach of making legislations, guaranteeing employment, food, health, education, etc. was an equally big failure.

COVID - 19 has once again brought the whole issue of inequalities and miseries of the masses to the fore. After experimenting with two approaches, namely, Bhagwati's approach of non-interference with growth in the name of redistribution and second that of A. K. Sen's approach of guaranteeing employment, education, food, and health, we are back to the miseries of the masses, post-COVID-19. Having said this, we must understand that compensating those left out from the growth process, by way of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA), free ration, free health, free education, etc., may be easier said than done. We have seen this 'welfare state' model of the European countries did work for some time, but now, most of the European

countries, despite their high level of development and per capita incomes, are on the verge of bankruptcy, and the governments there are not in a position to finance their welfare expenditure anymore. The pandemic has given us this lesson that though the government did the right thing by providing free ration and cash transfers during the pandemic to those who were worst hit, however, this is not a sustainable approach for all times. We see that excessive government expenditure has led to high levels of fiscal deficits, which run the risk of inflation, which again may hit the poor the most. Therefore, what we need is a sustainable model of employment and raising the incomes of the poor, workers, and farmers.

In India and many parts of the world, efforts to move towards self-reliance (Atmanirbharta) is the right approach, as the same would help us create employment and incomes in the country. In the past 30 years, our dependence on imports has increased tremendously, which has turned the balance of trade against us. Though the surplus in services trade (thanks to software exports) and remittances from NRIs has helped in keeping deficit in the balance of payment on current account, smaller, however, pressure on the Indian rupee has led to its depreciation year after year. Another victim of the excessive dependence on imports has been the employment as a result of a decline in manufacturing.

Taking lessons from the pandemic, the government, which was already pushing hard for its 'Make in India' program, has given a renewed call for self-reliance, namely '*Atmanirbhar Bharat*.' Under this program, a package including production-linked incentives (PLIs), rising tariffs, push for domestic production of rare intermediate products, such as semiconductors, solar equipments, active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs), and others have started giving a push to domestic manufacturing. We can hope that this may give a new push to employment.

Apart from this, the need of the hour is to give a push to employment generation in rural areas by encouraging non-farm activities in rural areas. There is a need to usher in a new era of self-reliant villages, with job creation at the village level in dairy, poultry, horticulture, floriculture, bamboo farming, cottage industry, food processing, high-value crops, and more and more value addition at the village level; a new ecosystem, where our villagers are not constrained to migrate to cities and can earn sufficiently to remain gainfully employed in the rural areas only.

Conclusion

COVID-19 and the outcome of the same have impacted different sections of society differently, and efforts of the government to deal with the lockdowns and minimize the losses, say, by way of online education, etc., have accentuated the already existing disparities in the country. The section, which is less fortunate, or say deprived, namely children and others of economically weaker sections, women folk, and people of backward states, districts, and regions, have been the worst hit. As a result, the disparities have increased tremendously.

Limitations of the Study and Scope for Future Research

This research paper has been created based on our readings and collaborative research ideas. This research paper has indicated the various aspects of disparities due to COVID-19 in health, education, socioeconomic dimensions, and macroeconomic dynamics that can be further researched empirically in the future. Accordingly, the research outcomes may vary. Moreover, the impact of COVID-19 may be studied at the State level rather than focusing on the country level.

Authors' Contribution

Dr. Phool Chand perceived the idea and developed a qualitative proposal to undertake the study. He further extracted/reviewed research papers with high repute. Prof. Ashwani Mahajan verified the analytical procedures

and supervised the study. Prof. Ashwani Mahajan also prepared the conclusion section of the paper with some logical recommendations.

Conflict of Interest

The authors certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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