

Learning and Changing: Opportunities for Adult Education in COVID19

By Rajesh Tandon

Rajesh Tandon is an internationally acclaimed leader and practitioner of participatory research and development and joint deputy chair of the Board of Trustees. In 1982, he founded the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), a voluntary organization that provides support to grassroots initiatives in South Asia.



Scenario

“In order to prevent spread of virus, various governments and health experts have been recommending two main steps:

- Social distancing, in effect it means **physical distancing** from each other
- Work from Home

These steps are in addition to washing hands and other personal hygiene considerations. As many of our offices are now closed, and we are trying to work from home, it would be important for us to think about those around us, in our households, neighbourhoods, etc. who may not be able to take these steps.

If you are a daily wage worker, maid, driver, plumber, vendor, cleaner, delivery person (couriers, newspapers, home delivery), how can you continue to earn a livelihood if you are ‘forced’ to work from home?

If you live in a small hut, cramped room, informal housing, crowded with several other members of family, how would you exercise social/physical distancing? For several such people, staying away from home has been the method of ‘distancing’.”

I sent out this memo to my colleagues and partners in India on March 20, 2020, five days before official lockdown was enforced. Over this period of ten weeks since then, the realities above have worsened for such citizens of India. Middle class residents, employers and businesses operating in large economic urban centres continue to deny livelihood opportunities to their former employees and service-providers, fearing COVID-19 infection.

Little do they realise that corona came to India with international travellers, and only the economically well-off afford that. So, ‘rich man’s’ infections are causing hardships, pain, distress and hunger to the vast majority of urban, informal, migrant workers in India today!



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Policy Response

The immediate (though belated by two months) policy response of the Government of India was to invoke Disaster Management Act 2005 on March 24, 2020, as the lockdown began. Officials began to issue cryptic orders in English language through digital means. Statements by senior ministers and officials on media created a sense of fear of the unknown 'dragon' about to attack them and their loved ones.

All hell was let loose; panic buying and hoarding by the 'haves'; panic running away by the 'have-nots'. Those in daily wage and income occupations (nearly 80% of India's workforce) lost their livelihood, income, place to stay/shelter and food.

In the meanwhile, orders continued to pour in from many different authorities, in digital form and in English. Underlying these ways of communicating to Indian public were several assumptions made by the central government:

- Every citizen is digitally well-connected with smart phones (official data indicates less than 12% of households have smartphones)
- All have unlimited mobile data charge to download pages of these instructions (less than 25% households have internet)
- Should they run out of data/call charge, they have both the money and technology to recharge (false, since physical shops were not open any more)
- And of course, they will figure out what is said in English (no more than 10 % of adult Indians have functional skills in reading English)

As all schools, colleges and educational/coaching institutions were also shut down, new ways of continuing teaching and learning were being explored. In an early set of recommendations, the Education Committee of Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce & Industry (FICCI) made a series of observations and recommendations to the government on March 25. It recommended online learning and teaching for K-12 schools, but recognised:

"Public schools and low-fee private schools especially are likely facing a larger impact on teaching and learning, owing to heavy reliance on brick and mortar means of delivering lessons."

In its recommendations for re-orienting skills training, it acknowledged that..."In the current skill- training ecosystem, candidates who are from economically weaker sections and have enrolled in short-term courses are most vulnerable to the present situation. They need to be supported with 3-6 months duration online courses".

It also made an appeal for support to teachers..."There is a huge number of contract teachers who will be affected, should there be longer time of closure. It's important to ensure there is no panic in this teaching/ academic community, insecurity of job loss."

Over this period, emerging policy consensus is to go 'online', without adequate and firm commitment for investments in connectivity, learners' access and teachers' preparation.



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Reports are already coming in of loss of employment of teachers, trainers in skills centres and instructors/coaches, especially those who do not have digital competence. Only students (less than 10% of total) from households with digital access have completed courses, at both high school & college levels.

The lack of authentic information and proper understanding of the virus and its impacts resulted in huge out-migration of workers from cities, hoping to return home to be with their loved ones. Confusion prevailed massively over the past ten weeks, as contents & language of instructions, modes of delivery and the chaotic physical space made it difficult for migrant workers to travel home. As we wrote on May 6:

“I have been receiving reports from Mumbai, Pune, Surat, Ahmedabad, Hyderabad, Lucknow, Indore and other urban centres where 42 days of lockdown has made migrant labour anxious to return home. My estimates indicate nearly 6-8 million of them still stranded, and wanting to go home. They are hungry and without shelter; they are being treated inhumanely in temporary and forced shelter homes in these cities; they are spending money, whatever is left, to re-charge their mobile so that they can speak to their loved ones. Several have tried to travel by bus or tempo or truck, by road. But crossing inter-state borders is a nightmare. There is widespread confusion among security agencies across states as to what is permissible and what is not. They are asked to produce medical certificates by police for which they are being fleeced by unscrupulous clinics.”

Migrant workers, tired, hungry and anxious, are returning home to prospects of no livelihood and fear of stigma from their own communities.

Emerging Challenges

It has been ten weeks since lockdown began in India. Though it is gradually being lifted, several new realities are beginning to emerge, suggesting critical areas for change:

1. It has become clear that public health awareness and infrastructure is exceptionally inadequate and weak. The investment in learning on prevention and protection for ‘Health for All’ has been forgotten by planners and doers, both.
2. While local civil society organisations around the country quickly prepared local language informational material on such matters as washing hands, maintaining distance, staying at home, wearing mask, they lacked capacity to use these for actual transaction with local citizens due to complete physical lockdown.
3. Public authorities continue to equate release of official orders in English language with what has come to be known as ‘behaviour change communication’. Giving orders unilaterally, without opportunity for even seeking clarifications, does not tantamount to learning, even by junior officials in the same government department, as this pandemic has amply demonstrated.
4. Despite being known as global home to ‘digital technology expertise’ for the past two decades, Indian digital fraternity has not been able to create hardware, software and

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humanware required for the diversity of Indian communities, locations and regions. They have been too busy servicing the 'global market', mostly in Europe & North America

5. The massive stigma attached with virus-infected persons and their families has been astonishing to all who have been championing life with dignity. Stigma, and banishment, continues to plague Indian society, across the board. The urban middle class gated community is not allowing maids, drivers and service providers to work in their homes and colonies, openly calling them 'super-spreaders'. These informal workers continue to lose their livelihood, even when lockdown is lifting, months after it all began.

On the other hand, rural communities in poor regions of Odisha, West Bengal, Jharkhand, etc. are treating returning migrants as 'untouchables'; they are stigmatised as carriers of corona virus from metro urban centres.

6. There is a push towards further privatisation of education through online platforms built by private providers. Having adopted the credo for 'education by digital' for all levels of education and skills training, the governments are unwilling to invest in a process of learning which will be inclusive of all socio-economic, linguistic, regional and religious communities from where learners come.

Implications for ALE

In a recent webinar (April 29, 2020), discussions produced several key messages for adult learning & education, its policies, providers and processes¹:

- Advocacy for public provisioning of digital learning
- Building capacity of teachers and facilitators
- Ensuring inclusive access to digital technology for life-long learning

These recommendations are unexceptional, and perhaps apply universally, beyond India and the sub-continent. Adult educators and their providers will have to become digitally savvy to support education in the future.

However, at this stage of technology, how much of teaching & learning can actually be supported through online digital, virtual methods and tools? Are there unrealistic expectations of panacea for education through cyber space?

A professor of technology from the most prestigious Indian Institute of Technology explicitly talked about his frustrations in online only teaching to engineering students thus:

"It is good that we have online options but let us not kid ourselves into the illusion of normalcy. It is worrisome that despite ground realities of this sort, a sense of digital triumphalism seems to hang in the air. Tech-obsessed policy-makers, driven by arguments of "efficiency", low costs and scalability, are beginning to fantasize that in the post-COVID world, there may be no urgent need to build new schools and institutions; all that is needed

¹ [Webinar Report: Adult Learning & Education Central to Responding Under Covid-19](#)

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are video recordings, artificially intelligent teaching bots - hosted on the internet - and a device to connect.”²

But the pandemic has posed many emerging issues outlined above, to which adult educators may want to address themselves critically.

- Re-Building Communities

The structural and socio-economic fault lines in our societies have been so very neatly exposed during the past three months. Employers & employees, maids & vendors, neighbours and even members of households have started mistrusting each other for fear of infection. Returning to ‘life with dignity’ requires unlearning and re-learning social contracts, mutual respect and care for the needy. Foundational human values have been ‘locked-down’ by the virus, and large-scale popular education efforts have to be mobilised to ‘re-build’ communities. This is as true for poor communities but also for the not-so-poor ones, rural and urban, agricultural and industrial.

- Education for All

Over the past thirty years, since Jomtien declaration of April 1990, education for all has shrunk in purpose, scope, coverage and pedagogy. Much attention has focused upon skill building for adolescents and youth, largely those who do not go beyond high school level formal education, to prepare them for the market. Focus of learning for most professionals and those with higher education qualifications has been on professional up-gradation of knowledge for career progression. Programmes of adult learning have also become functional alone, English speaking and computer literacy being most popular. Perspectives of holistic learning, learning from life, about life and nature and society around are largely residual activities, time and funds permitting. Popular education, community education, social and emancipatory adult education need to be re-inserted in the discourse and practice of adult education worldwide.

- Re-imagining the New Normal

The pandemic has prompted many scholars and activists around the world to begin to elaborate elements of a ‘new normal’ which will privilege human well-being over prosperity, happiness over GDP, nurturing nature over its exploitative consumption, and future generations over the present. But such a ‘new normal’ is unlikely to be realised without substantial ‘re-education’ of the elites, professionals and political and economic interest groups. Unlearning past paradigms, economic models and technology applications are required; but more importantly, new attitudes of compassion, care, dignity, respect and humility towards all life forms and beings will need to be learnt. Adult education needs to ‘step-up-to-this-plate’.

² [After Weeks Of Online Classes At IIT, Here's The Truth](#)



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- Technology Support to Human Interactions

The lockdown period has made all educators, including adult educators, realise their lack of capacity and infrastructure for digital, online teaching and learning. There is a huge opportunity to acquire such capacity, provided investments in digital infrastructure are publicly provisioned and accountable. Social infrastructure does need digital technology, but not as a standalone educational medium. Under the current realities, many are tempted to go over-board and pretend that human interactions will not be needed for learning. The term 'social' may then become hyper-digital, as if robots inhabit the planet. Restoring ecological balances, as imagined in the new normal above, may in fact reduce the frequency of life disruptions like pandemics. Re-orientation of technology (and its believers) to support human interactions to facilitate learning and changing will be critical.

- Investing in the local

The past period of lockdown has demonstrated that solutions that resonate with each local context get adopted. Local knowledge, wisdom and creativity were expressed by local citizens and local leaders to deal with the pandemic. Where local institutions, local leaders and local communities were proactive as agents of their own development, prevention and protection from the virus was effective. Such networks of local actors, relationships of mutual trust amongst them and faith in their collective capacity to find solutions appropriate to their needs saved lives, medically and economically. Practitioners and organisations of adult education need to strengthen such local social capital in each community and region, and build on local knowledge and capacities. Knowledge democracy is the building block of local, participatory democracy.