

Old Habits and New Norms

Madhav Chavan¹

In spite of the reminders in our media of a possible recurrence, the pandemic has faded in our memories. Someone in my school friends' WhatsApp group had asked during the first weeks of the lockdown whether we believed things would go back to the old normal after the pandemic was over. Some of them felt it would be a new world. At that time there was talk of the 'new normal' everywhere. Online education was projected as the future and so was working from home. But, the lockdown began to end in bits and pieces and the fear of the pandemic began to recede. The horrors and pains of the pandemic period too may have faded from our individual and collective memories. There was a relief in going back to what we were used to but many new things have become a part of our lives and we seem to have let go of parts of some old habits. Depending upon people's socioeconomic backgrounds, what new things have become a part of their lives and what has disappeared may differ. When schools were closed, those who were connected with them – administrators, teachers and students – learned and absorbed some new skills, practices and even ideas. Which of these have survived? And which old habits have resurfaced?

ASER 2022 reports many big changes in rural areas. Some can be found in the main pages and others in the appendices. Almost every household (95.8%) has a cell phone in 2022, as against 90.2% in 2018. Over the same period, the proportion of households with smartphones has doubled from 36% to 74.8%, with many states going above 90%. ASER 2021 had already estimated that 67.6% households have smartphones. Within one year smartphones have spread wider and further. Mobile phones and smartphones are a recent new normal for rural families, although for most urban folk it is an old story. The question relevant to ASER is, how useful are smartphones for education? In 2021, ASER found that of the children who had smartphones at home, 26% could not access them for studies, 47% had some access, while the rest had access all the time. There is no doubt that cell phones and smartphones were used a lot by NGOs and school systems in different ways during the lockdown but this issue of access was present everywhere. Some people called it "online" education, which it was not. Ed-tech has become a popular term too but we are quite far from using the strengths of digital technology to improve our mass education.

Television had become the old normal in most households before the popularity of the smartphone surged ahead. As a result, the percentage of households with TV sets has barely changed from 62.5% to 62.8% over the last four years. It is no surprise that the availability of reading material other than textbooks has gone down from 6.6% to 5.2% households. Is 'not-reading' but listening and watching the new normal? Will it become a part of the education process?

Fears had been expressed that economic stress might lead to children dropping out of school but this has not happened. Instead, the already low proportion of not-enrolled children in the 6-14 age group has halved from 2.8% to 1.6% over four years. Now, going to school is every child's habit. Another change is that a very large proportion of children have moved from private schools to government schools. Private school enrollment had been rising for almost a decade. In 2018, 30.9% children were enrolled in private schools. This has come down to 25.1% in 2022. This 5.8 percentage point decrease amounts to a sudden 19 percent drop in private school enrollment, and an 11 percent increase in rural government school enrollment. The state school systems have absorbed these 8 million or more children without a fuss. If it was not for the widespread infrastructure of the state school systems, millions of children leaving private schools would have been left without schools.

While the shift from private schools to government schools is most likely due to economic stress, it has to be noted that percentage of children in both government and private schools who go to private tutors has gone up by about 4 percentage points above the already existing 26.4%. The increase is not uniform but it has happened in all states. This means that 30% of all rural children going to government and private schools are now also going to private tutors.

Tutoring seems to have been a tradition in several states such as West Bengal and Bihar, where the proportion of children going to private schools was low and near 70% children were going to tutors. Large numbers of young people in villages earned a living by tutoring children in these states. It appears that in the post-pandemic period the practice of private tutoring may spread and grow in other states as young educated people prepare for, and wait for jobs.

A couple of decades ago, the three A's of universal education were said to be Access, Attendance and Achievement. Given the enrollment figures, the issue of the first A is solved. The next A is attendance.

What proportion of children enrolled in government schools are to be found in their class on any given day? ASER has recorded broad regional patterns of attendance in India over the last decade and more. The Southern and Western states

¹ President and member of the Board of Directors, Pratham Education Foundation

show attendance figures of high 80% and above. In contrast, the Central and North Central states range from mid-fifties to seventy. The Eastern states range in the mid-sixties to mid-seventies. These patterns have not changed even though schools opened after two years of closure. The old normal continues.

The third A is Achievement. “Learning loss” that children may have suffered due to school closure was and is a big concern. But the data can be seen from different angles as a case of a glass half full or half empty.

Most children who ‘entered’ Std I in July 2020 had no regular classes for one full year, and a large proportion went to school in fits and starts, or not at all, in the second year. If learning is only assumed to happen in school classrooms, no child in Std III today should have knowledge of reading or numeracy. However, the fact is that whereas 37% children in Std III could read at least a Std I level text in government schools at an all-India level in 2018, the proportion has dropped ‘only’ 7 percentage points to 30% in 2022. In private schools 61% could read a Std I level text in 2018, which dropped to 52% in 2022. In government schools the drop amounts to nearly 20% over the 2018 level while in private schools it is 15% over the 2018 level. Of course, the drops differ from state to state and in a few cases there is improvement rather than decline in reading levels. These interesting cases have to be considered separately, but the more important point to me is that a large proportion of children learned to read in spite of school closure. In the case of arithmetic, there is only small changes at the all-India level in the proportion of children in Std III, or in any higher class up to Std VIII, who can do at least a 2-digit subtraction sum. It is as though school closure did not happen.

So, if nearly the same proportion of children learned reading and basic numeracy whether schools were open or closed for two years, how did the children learn? Who taught them?

It is reasonable to assume that some amount of learning will happen if there is someone willing to learn, someone willing to help, some material to learn from and some amount of engagement of the learner. ASER 2021 learned that nearly 70% children had someone to help at home. Mother, father or siblings were helpful. Teachers seem to have called or made home visits or used digital devices to deliver materials and instruction where possible. In addition, as discussed before, 30% children are helped by private tutors. ASER measures learning at the very foundational level for all children so we cannot comment on the loss of learning at the higher levels of an already overambitious curriculum. It is a reasonable guess that at higher levels the loss may be greater especially given the emphasis on memorisation of textbooks.

There is a need to research in some depth how children may have learned at home while schools were closed. Isolation of the home from the school is the old norm. Bringing them together is the new one in which the family and the teacher, the village and the school work together to help children learn skills and knowledge. Could this type of hybrid home-schooling with technology assistance represent the model for the educational system or the schools of tomorrow? We know very little about the effectiveness of technology assisted learning – a lot of which happened during the pandemic. The tech sector could invest much more in understanding what worked (or works) well, and what did not.

The lockdown may have given an impetus to ending the isolation of the home from school. In the old days community and parents’ participation in children’s education was much talked about, but in practice it usually meant occasionally attending committee meetings. In the post-pandemic era, the possibility of involving parents much more in the education of their children should be explored seriously. The National Education Policy of 2020 talks about involving communities and parents in the process of education. It will be good to build on the experiences during the period of school closures.

This period also broke down what could be called the digital barrier. The resistance to technology at all levels collapsed as the need to reach children became urgent. The pandemic accelerated teachers’ capability to access online resources/ courses. Government mandates that teachers use online platforms such as NISHTHA, DIKSHA, etc., as well as a range of applications for monitoring, assessment, etc. involved massive “upskilling” in a short period of time. But the digital solutions relied on sending messages, links and attachments for children to learn from. Textbooks and lessons remained dominant. In the urgency to keep the education system going, there was no room for experimentation with content and pedagogy. It is now time to experiment and improve upon the school model.

A hundred years ago when implementation of free and compulsory education was being experimented with in Baroda and Kolhapur, India’s literacy rate was barely around 11%. The model of schools where illiterate-unschooled parents brought their children to the teacher, the sole educated person in the area, was perhaps the only workable model. It was also the model existing in the Western countries that was being exported to us. Today more than 50% mothers and 80% fathers have more than five years of education, according to ASER 2022. The teachers are no longer the only educated persons in the village. Most parents have access to smartphones and it seems that they have actively participated in their children’s learning efforts during the pandemic.

It is possible to envisage a model in which the school is a place that serves partly as a day-care center for the 3-8 or 3-10 age group in a village and partly as a place for learning foundational skills and knowledge. By the age of 8 all children can learn the basics along the lines of goals outlined by the Foundational Literacy and Numeracy Mission. In the older age groups of 8-10 and 11-14, it should be possible for children to learn in groups that are helped by the school as a resource for learning materials and instructors who can help. Learning the skills and methods of learning is the most important thing for this age group, as opposed to memorising. Use of technology and home assistance from parents is entirely possible. In fact, as we observe in middle class homes, parents often sit with their children to help them with studies. Preparing parents to help their children at home and in groups of children should become entirely possible. As they grow older, children should become more independent learners, spending less time with a 'teacher' and more time with resource persons in-person and online.

The curriculum and the examination system are two major factors that cause the system to become extremely rigid. Flexibility will come from a change of mindsets and the creative use of technology. Rigidity is a part of our old mindsets. The pandemic forced us to look at schooling differently. The school system coped with the challenge and became flexible to try different solutions. It is important to learn from what we did and how we did it when schools were closed. It was a period of extreme restrictions but it also offered freedom to try new ideas. Now that there are no restrictions, we need to persist with changing mindsets to try out new ideas and create new norms.

The National Education Policy of 2020 did well to emphasise importance of foundational literacy and numeracy. The Foundational Literacy and Numeracy Mission that follows from the policy is now leading the achievement of set goals. The policy also provides encouragement to change mindsets in the approach to school education. Going beyond policy, there are indications that governments are taking the Mission quite seriously.

India will soon be the most populous young country in the world. It is a new world of new ideas. It is important that we set an example and give the world a new model of education as we discard old habits and create new norms for education.

