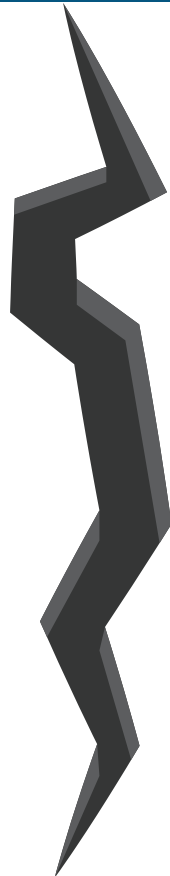


# The Digital Divide

*A conversation with children*



The lockdown imposed across the country due to COVID-19 has severely impacted the education system. **According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 1.26 billion children worldwide are affected by school closures due to the pandemic. This is 72% of the world's student population. India comprises over 320 million of these learners.** Due to the sudden shutdown of schools, the administration and policymakers suggested resorting to e-learning and online classes. It was imperative for the schools to regularize and manage online classes in order to avoid the nullification of an academic year for the students. Children, on the other hand, were both sceptical and nervous about the entire process of digital classes.

The prevalent digital divide in various regions added to the anxiety amongst the children. The children studying in private institutions may have easier access to technology but the situation is not as convenient for students of government schools and colleges. **According to the Key Indicators of Household Social Consumption on Education in India report[1], less than 15% of rural Indian households have Internet (as opposed to 42% urban Indian households). A mere 13% of people surveyed (aged above five) in rural areas – just 8.5% of females – could use the Internet.** The poorest households cannot afford a smartphone or a computer. The inaccessibility to smartphones and internet connectivity has made the alternative of online education worrisome for many children. Various non-governmental organizations are making efforts towards filling the gaps by assisting in making resources available for children for their online education.

### About Sanmaan

Sanmaan protects the rights of children rescued from begging and also prevents children from being pushed into beggary. The program started in 2018 with the children in Jay Ambe Nagar community as a part of prevention programs. The work was focused towards enrolling the children in school, conducting outreach programs, linking the children to referral organizations, and organizing community awareness sessions. Every month, as part of the monitoring process, the Sanmaan team conducts internal meetings to discuss the feedback received from the community. The meeting is attended by project coordinators, outreach coordinators, senior project managers, and project managers.

[1] Based on the 2017-18 National Sample Survey

From the month of September 2020, Sanmaan also began conducting dance classes with the children. The ones participating in these classes belonged to the age group of 13-17 years. After one of the dance classes held on 2nd October, 2020, Sanmaan team had a discussion with the children wherein they were asked to share their opinion whether schools should reopen amidst the pandemic. The children enthusiastically shared their opinions.

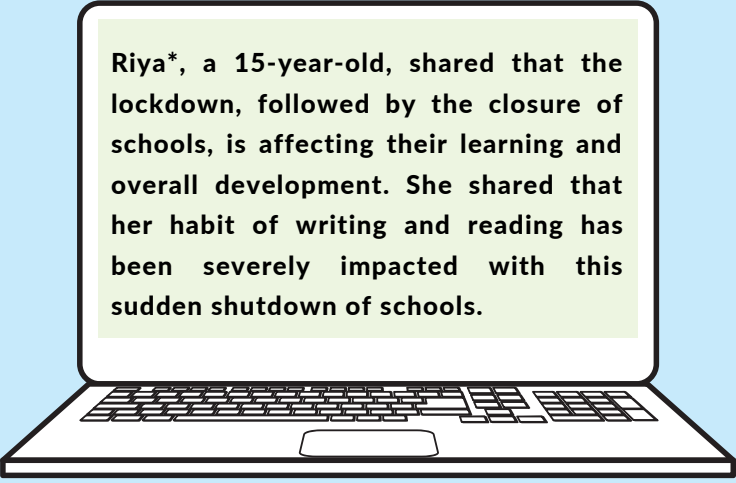
## Children's response to Online Classes

A GR was circulated by the state of Maharashtra in the month of June stating that online classes should be conducted between 1-3 hrs per day for different standards. It also stated that the teachers would use the medium of WhatsApp or video conferencing to resolve any doubts of the children. During the meeting in the month of October 2020, the team shared their experience about a discussion they had with 10 - 12 children from Jay Amber Nagar, Chembur. The discussion focused on children's responses or perspective towards online classes and the government's sudden decision to reopen schools, specifically for children from classes 9th - 12th.

Raj\*, a 16-year-old, shared that he was unable to access online classes for around 15-20 days. His family had only one smartphone and there was no money for the data recharge. It was only when an organization volunteered to assist with the data recharge that he was able to attend online classes. He added that there are some children in the community who cannot access online classes as their families' cannot afford smartphones. There are also some children who have just one phone at home which with their parents take with them when they go for work. Thus, it is only in the evening that the children have access to the phone. In such situations, children sit with the others who have smartphones and attend online classes.

Kapil\*, a 16-year-old, shared that his ability to sit and study for a longer period of time has also reduced. Previously, he would sit and study for long hours in school but after the lockdown was announced, he can barely sit for an hour. Avni\*, a 17-year-old, also shared a similar concern. She said that some of the younger children in her community have lost their practice in writing. Only the ones self-motivated to study, attend classes and listen to the teachers diligently.

\*Names of all the children have been changed in order to protect their identities



Riya\*, a 15-year-old, shared that the lockdown, followed by the closure of schools, is affecting their learning and overall development. She shared that her habit of writing and reading has been severely impacted with this sudden shutdown of schools.

Arjun\*, a 17-year-old, shared that he is concerned about his younger brother's sudden lack of interest in studies. His brother has started to feel lazy and is usually bored. Arjun is worried if his brother doesn't study properly, it would further affect his higher education.

Malini\*, a 14-year-old, shared that some children turn off their cameras after logging in for online classes. Instead of focusing on studies, they play games on the digital device or take selfies. Pinky\*, a 17-year-old, voiced a similar concern. She said that many children in the community mark their attendance and instead of attending classes, they play PUBG or watch TikTok. Since parents of many children work, children are without adult supervision. Meena\*, a 16-year-old, shared her concern that during online examination, although children are expected not to copy their answers from the textbook, some children still do it as there is no teacher to supervise them.

While the team members were sharing the experiences, it did appear that children don't have a conducive environment to study. Most of the children in the community have parents working as daily wage earners. They leave for work early in the morning and come back late in the evening because they don't have the privilege to work from home. Almost all families are facing a financial crisis amidst the lockdown. In this scenario, they pick up whatever work opportunities they get in order to repay the loans they had taken during the lockdown. Moreover, the children are all first generation learners which makes it challenging for their parents to help them with studies.

## Children's response to Government's sudden decision to reopen schools

The team then discussed about the recent announcement made by the Maharashtra government regarding the reopening of schools for children from classes 9th-12th. Most of the children were apprehensive about attending school.

As per the team, children shared their concern regarding the syllabus being reduced by 25%. The children appearing for 10th standard examination were worried about wasting an academic year if the schools don't begin to function again. Malini\*, a 14-year-old, said that she fears if these situations persist, a lot of children would drop out of school.

Shiva\*, a 16-year-old, firmly said he won't be attending school in the beginning because there is a higher chance of getting infected in schools amidst the pandemic. Moreover, children might not be able to take precautions, he said.

## Precautions suggested by the children to ensure safety during the reopening of schools amidst COVID-19

The team asked the children for suggestions on the precautions the schools should take in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The team had also asked the children if the schools should reopen for students of all classes. Moreover, if schools reopen, can children maintain social distancing during recess or while using the same washrooms?



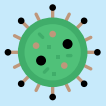
A few children agreed for no recess. They added that children could go outside for a 10 minutes break. The school should follow strict rules to ensure that children do not engage in any outdoor activities during breaks or recess period and that social distancing is maintained effectively.



According to Kajal\*, a 15-year-old, COVID-19 testing should be mandatory for all the children before reopening of school. She added that those who test positive can be asked to stay home, isolate themselves, recover and then attend school. The school should be well equipped with sanitization facility and should follow all precautionary measures.



Sita\*, a 16-year-old, said that taking precautionary measures like putting on masks and sanitizing hands can lessen the risk of getting infected. She further added that the schools should be open for lesser hours as that will help practice social distancing effectively. All the children agreed and suggested that the school should be open for a few hours for 15 students per class and the remaining students should be accommodated in the second half.



Malini\*, a 14-year-old, shared that during recess, children should not be allowed to go out of the school to prevent them from purchasing food sold on the streets like imli, kairi, etc. Leaving the school premises to access these snacks may increase the possibility of them getting infected as no social distancing or hygiene precautions are usually maintained by vendors.



The team had also discussed some guidelines prepared by the Health Ministry on school reopening with the children. Neelam\*, a 13-year-old, said that attending school should be voluntary. The ones who decide to attend school should be divided in batches and every student should carry their own sanitizer as a precautionary measure.



Amit\*, a 16-year-old, said that school should continue and instead of the mid-day meals, monthly groceries like pulses, rice, etc. should be distributed to students from classes 1st – 8th. This will ensure that children don't come in contact with each other while having meals.



Dheeraj\*, a 15-year-old, asked during the end of the discussion what could be done if someone in school tests COVID-19 positive. The team asked the children for suggestions and they proposed that anyone who tests positive should stay away from school for at least one month.

## Accessing Quality Education during COVID-19

The team ensured that the discussion had equal participation of boys and girls. It was seen during the discussion that the girls had fairly outnumbered the boys in sharing their opinions. While the government has evidently seen online learning as an alternative to school learning, the children who are at the edge of vulnerability don't have the resources to access online/ digital education. The study 'Scenario amidst COVID-19: On ground Situations and Possible Solutions' was conducted by child rights NGO Smile Foundation with the aim of analysing the access to technology. It surveyed 42,831 students at various school levels and it was learnt that 56% of children don't have access to online education.[2]

[2] The entire report can be read here- <https://www.businesstoday.in/current/economy-politics/56-children-have-no-access-to-smartphones-for-e-learning-study/story/406842.html>

The administration has been asking the school authorities to encourage children to attend online classes as much as possible. It is not possible for every child to attend online classes due to the lack of proper internet connectivity and smartphones. The pandemic has highlighted the digital divide prevailing in the society and the children at the periphery are being severely affected. The current situation has made education inaccessible for the children, making them fall through the gaps. Access to quality education is the fundamental right of every child yet a number of children are being deprived of it. It has been more than 6 months and the uncertainty is causing anxiety amongst students. It is imperative to form accessible alternatives to help children with online education. The state is yet to provide a concrete solution to this crisis. Should the pandemic be blamed for this digital divide or has the state failed to provide an inclusive education system for children?

P.S. We are sure that most of you must be doing such data gathering and analyzing exercises at your end too. If you are, please do share the same with us. We shall be more than happy to share it on our website

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