Introduction:

Education for social transformation is well accepted across the globe and Education for Social inclusion is one of the key challenges facing developing countries. It is a necessity for the creation of equitable and inclusive education for all to build safe, stable, and just societies. Social inclusion is a dynamic process and an outcome. As a dynamic process, it ensures equal opportunities and resources for all to participate fully in the development process of redistribution, recognition, and participation in decision making. India is one of the largest democratic countries in the world with a great deal of diversity. The unique characteristic of Indian society is ‘Unity in Diversity’, which is visible in its religions, languages, cultures, and castes. The Education system of a country does not function in isolation from the society of which it is a part. Hierarchies of castes, economic status, gender relations, and cultural diversities as well as uneven economic development also deeply influence issues relating to access, equity, and quality in education. Our society has been characterized by deeply entrenched social inequalities between various social groups and castes since ancient times. The marginalized groups of the society were subjected to social and economic oppression. Extending educational opportunities to the marginalized groups were considered an antidote to this longstanding discrimination. Several attempts have been made by social reformers and others to make education accessible to these marginal groups with varying degrees of success. Quality without social equity is as bad as social equity without quality. Despite a lot of measures employed for ensuring equity in education, several challenges are confronting the country. There are a number of key challenges which continue to confront the country. It is evident that the social context of education in any country
presents a number of challenges that must be addressed by policymakers both in its design and its implementation.

**Universalization of Elementary Education in India**

Universalization of Elementary Education in India implies “Elementary Education for All” (Classes I to VIII) and for every child, without any kind of discrimination on the basis of caste, creed, sex, religion, region, etc. Elementary Education has been one of the focus areas in the successive five-year plans. Working groups of the Planning commission targeted the goal of Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE) and the targets were revised successively during the 1960s and 1970s. The Kothari Commission (1964-66) proposed to achieve the target no later than 1986. In 1979-80, the Department of Education, Govt. of India established Non-formal education centers as a strategy to achieve UEE and to reach the places where elementary schools were unreached and to reach all the children, particularly millions of girls and working children whose participation in the school system is deprived by socio-economic conditions. This program enabled the learners to learn at their pace. The National Policy on Education (NPE-1986) set the platform for the Central Government to play a key role in achieving the Universalization of Elementary Education. Para 5.12 of NPE resolves that free and compulsory education of satisfactory quality to all children up to 14 years of age before the commencement of the 21st century needs to be achieved.

Universalization of Elementary Education has been recognized as the true index of the general, economic, political, and social development of a country. It is considered as a foundation stone on which the entire structure of formal education rests. The National Education Policy of India (2020) has emphasized the importance of Primary education and suggested several pedagogical approaches to make it more interesting and relevant to the children and also to make it a joyful learning experience. It is a place, where the basic skills like reading, writing, and counting are learned and gain the power to articulate and express with self-confidence.

Having realized the importance of Elementary education, India has been making lots of efforts right from the time of independence. The vision of education for India is contained in Article-45 of the constitution- “The state shall endeavor to provide a period of ten years from commencement of this constitution, free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years.” The Right to Education Act (2009) has given a
tremendous push to the quality primary education by making people accountable for the enrolment of the children in the primary schools, teachers to deliver quality teaching-learning process, and the school leaders to create a conducive learning environment. Tremendous progress has been achieved in the qualitative expansion of Elementary Education and there has been a phenomenal increase in the number of schools and enrolment. As a result of such expansion, almost 99% of the rural population has access to primary schools within a walking distance of one kilometer along with this accessibility the coverage of children has also increased considerably.

**Covid-19 Pandemic and Educational Resilience**

The year 2020 with the Covid-19 pandemic has created a big gap in education with the strictly imposed shutdowns and social distancing. Educational institutions were closed for quite some time and later online learning was used to continue the learning process. These happenings in the country were unplanned and unprepared. However, the teachers and the school administration at all levels thoughtfully initiated the online digital learning modes to reach out to the unreached through Information and Communication Technologies. Technology has the potential to support pedagogy with multi-media representations that create an environment that allows a dynamic context and lets instruction become more engaging and interactive. The COVID-19 pandemic is widely considered to be the most challenging health crisis the world has ever faced, attacking societies at their core, as described by the World Health Organization (WHO). The novel coronavirus affected several lives, jobs, and opportunities around the world. It has affected all segments of the population. The education sector is no exception. Students from all backgrounds had to face considerable challenges to continue their learning process.

The pandemic has, in fact, forced the Education Sectors to rapidly move to virtual and blended modes of teaching and learning using various digital and interactive technologies. Students and teachers are exposed to various online platforms to adopt new pedagogical methods to learn and teach. Rapid response to pandemics in the education sector through various ICT initiatives to reach out to even the most marginalized populations in India is worth noting. Those who lack access to devices and connectivity and families who feel less equipped for to children learn from home have come out with innovative strategies and experiments with social media for educational purposes. One could see the monumental rise in using widespread use of online tools like WhatsApp, Zoom, Google Classroom,
Blackboard, mobile applications to facilitate communication with parents, telephone, television, and radio to try to reach every learner.

This paper presents a few such initiatives in India that have contributed to the continued learning of the students in remote areas during the pandemic crisis. This paper also focuses on the creative use of social media and digital devices for educational purposes to meet the needs of the remote rural and disadvantaged groups. These programs were thoughtfully imitated by the state governments which are contextually designed by keeping the local conditions of the region.

COVID-19 has affected Indian education very badly. As per UNESCO global monitoring report in India school closure affected a total of 320 million students as of 12th June 2020 (UNESCO, 2020a). It is assumed that this crisis will lead to a major dropout situation. In a recent study UNESCO estimates that at the primary and secondary (both lower and upper) education levels, the decrease in enrolment is estimated at around 11 million. Out of these 5.95 million are from South and West Asia, which is also the highest compared to other regions (UNESCO, 2020). A similar type of finding was drawn out by the Oxfam report as well which found that as many as 80% of Indian students couldn’t access online schooling during the lockdown, and many might not return to classrooms when they reopen (Baniwal, 2020 December 17). This is due to a number of factors including a) financial constraints and pressure to take up employment, b) household chores, c) childcare, especially when parents or caregivers are ill or have passed away, d) early and forced marriage and/or early and unintended pregnancy, with girls being particularly vulnerable, and, e) fear of a resurgence of the virus (UNESCO, 2020). This COVID not only brings dropout but also compromised the learning outcome. It has been observed that 92% of children on average have lost at least one language ability from the previous year across all classes which stands for 82% of mathematical ability (Azim Premji Foundation, 2021). The same concern of crisis in foundational literacy and numeracy was posed by NEP 2020 also.

India witnessed two waves of this pandemic and it is expected that the third wave of COVID-19 will most likely hit India again at the end of the year 2021. It is assumed that this will affect children the most although till now no exact predictions have been done for same still India needs to get ready with the solutions to handle the problem. This is the reason that MHRD is planning to give an immediate priority to establishing Operation Digital Board (ODB) all Govt. and Govt. aided secondary and senior secondary schools. (around 1.53 lakh
schools) as the situation gets normal (MHRD, 2020). In this scheme two Digital Boards, DD free dish, and Pre-loaded pen drives with contents from Class 1 to 12 will be provided to each school (MHRD, 2020). Not only will this but the use of various digital initiatives taken by GOI also be strengthened. On 25 March 2021, University Grants Commission (UGC) has allowed universities and colleges to offer up to 40% of the syllabus of a program in a semester online through the government's e-learning platform Study Webs of Active-Learning for Young Aspiring Minds (SWAYAM) (Kalita, 2021 March 30). The decisions clearly show that India is planning to use these digital solutions in a permanent manner even after the end of the Pandemic.

**SMILE: Social Media Interface for Learning Engagement**

SMILE has been a popular project that was initiated during the pandemic times in the state of Rajasthan to reach out to the unreached and help the students to continue their learning with the help of social media. The project SMILE is a form of a digital platform to provide free-of-cost online courses and classes through various social media platforms in all the government schools of the state of Rajasthan. It was launched to ensure the continuity of teaching and learning during the nationwide covid-19 lockdown. Rajasthan has believed and demonstrated its belief in strengthening its education system over the years. Project SMILE is a reinforcement of the commitment to continue imparting education in the difficult situation of coronavirus outbreak.” (“Digital Learning: Rajasthan Govt launches ‘SMILE’ for e-learning at school,” 2020).

The Project SMILE (Social Media Interface for Learning Engagement) was initiated on 13th April 2020. (“Digital Learning: Rajasthan Govt launches ‘SMILE’ for e-learning at school,” 2020), immediately after the nationwide lockdown. Within the initiative of SMILE, the “Aao Ghar Mein Seekhein” campaign was envisaged to ensure more reach and greater effectiveness. In this campaign, students, and teachers receive daily video content via WhatsApp across grades 1 to 12. For each topic, a module of 4 to 5 videos has been curated with 30-40 minutes of content using free and publicly available resources ("Project SMILE Facilitated Education to 3.5 Lakh Students In Rajasthan During Pandemic," 2021). This content is reviewed by a team of subject matter experts from SCERT (State Council of Educational Research and Training). Students and teachers could just click on the links and access the content. Students in Grade 10 and 12 also received 10 practice questions daily for more practice. WhatsApp groups are being created in order to send the study materials to the
students and teachers. Every day at 9 am, study materials are being uploaded to the groups, and parents/students can access it. Video content from classes 1 to 12 has also been uploaded in the groups. A YouTube channel and a Facebook page have also been developed where all the study materials will be uploaded so students and parents, who cannot connect through WhatsApp, can access the contents through these social media platforms. The students are promoted to Classes 10 and 12 from classes 9 and 11 on the basis of marks scored in the half-yearly examination and co-curricular activity and will be able to access the study material through the SMILE program.

The project was intended to cover all the students from classes 1 to 12 in Rajasthan government schools. The modes of education were upgraded in accordance with contemporary needs and to cover the technological divide, many teachers traveled to the homes of less privileged students. Under the “Aao Ghar Me Seekhein” campaign, through strong communication and diligent monitoring, an average of 3.5 lakh students log on each day to the content and the viewership has even reached up to 4.56 lakh students at its peak. ("Project SMILE Facilitated Education To 3.5 Lakh Students in Rajasthan During Pandemic," 2021). To ensure the online social media groups reach maximum children (via parents), including those in far-off areas, Panchayat level Education officers (PEEOs) are actively communicating with teachers in their jurisdiction to identify and add as many parents as possible. PEEOs have created two kinds of groups- one with all the teachers in their jurisdiction and another with all the students’ parents in their jurisdiction. Every morning, at 9 AM a message with the links of the videos for the day is forwarded via the WhatsApp channels from State Core Team to reach students (via parents) and teachers.

The content is currently reaching students in 12.78 lakh households via 9226 WhatsApp groups and 3.28 lakh teachers via 9768 WhatsApp groups every day. 2.5 lakh children are viewing the videos daily. 90% of students and teachers shared (via a feedback form) that the content quality was good. 98% of parents shared (via a feedback form) that their children learned a new topic after watching the videos. Class 1 to 8 students will be promoted to the next class directly. The board is preparing the format for pass certificates for classes 5 and 8 and for all other classes. The procedure required for promoting and admitting students to the next class will be done through online mode. The board is preparing e-content for all classes. The teaching process will continue in the online mode and teachers and officers will remain available accordingly. (Kunju, 2020)
Due to the fact that not all the students had smartphones or access to quality internet, many of them were from villages, they decided to take the school to the home of such students. Teachers visited such students at their homes, cleared their doubts, and issued homework. Though from the beginning it seemed not to be easy to fulfill 3.5 lakh student’s needs but happened to be successful with the help of the teachers. (“Project SMILE Facilitated Education To 3.5 Lakh Students In Rajasthan During Pandemic,” 2021)

(KITE): Kerala Infrastructure and Technology for Education

Project KITE is a flagship program of the state of Kerala to reach out to the remote through technology during pandemic times to ensure continuous learning and embodied their slogan “Physical Distance and Social Utility into practice”. An online program “First Bell” was devised to broadcast through VICTORS Educational Channel with stake holders engagement to ensure all children to attend the digital classes. Apart from the television, the program was made available on the web page of KITE and Facebook, and YouTube. The duration of the classes varies from thirty minutes to two hours and the classes are available simultaneously on Victers channel and website, mobile app, and social media pages for free. In case the classes were missed by the students due to any reasons, the classes can be downloaded and used later or repeatedly viewed thereby ensuring that no student is denied the availability of the classes.

Energized textbooks were introduced catering to all four mediums of instruction. Malayalam, English, Tamil, and Kannada. Over the last academic year, it has clocked a total of over 90 lakh scans. These initiatives of the state have been widely acknowledged and appreciated by the state’s stakeholders and the educational community of the country. Kerala’s example demonstrates how prioritization and targeted investment can enable universal access to ICT infrastructure and content for learners to continue learning.

(Digilep: Digital Learning Enhancement Program

DigiLEP Initiative is a creative program in the state of Madhya Pradesh for responding to the pandemic situation by keeping the socio-economic status of the diversified learning groups. The state has used this opportunity to envision integrating digital learning with classroom
teaching in the post-Covid by introducing well-planned interventions addressing critical elements of the learning ecosystem: students, parents, and teachers. The Digital Learning Enhancement Program, takes the advantage of the WhatsApp platform to provide learning opportunities. The program has three main elements: curation of very high-quality digital content, creation of a well-defined WhatsApp architecture of 50,000+ groups covering all clusters and secondary schools of the state, and a well-oiled delivery mechanism ensuring around 6.5 lakh+ views per day. Every cluster in the state has eight groups to cover parents of students in elementary grades, and at least one group for each class. Additionally, district-level WhatsApp groups called DigiLEP groups, have also been made where all cluster academic coordinators and all Principals are added. WhatsApp is one of the most widely used platforms among smartphone users and has been proved a crucial platform to continue learning during the pandemic. According to the recent data, the daily viewership of the content has increased from 2.5 lakh per day to around 7 lakh per day. In addition to this, the state has been actively engaging with other possible ICT-enabled interventions. Initiatives like, collaborating with All India Radio (AIR) to conduct Radio School, utilizing DIKSHA platform for providing educational resources for the students and teachers

(https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/India_Report_Digital_Education_0.pdf CSD )

**A Way Forward:**

The education sector has undergone a sea change, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. The unprecedented pandemic has made the education sector face several challenges. These challenges have enabled educational practitioners and policymakers at all levels to think creatively and plan need-based solutions to manage the situations and continue the teaching and learning process. ICT and digital innovations in the sector have helped to navigate through such difficult times. The importance and potential of digital learning and digital devices have been realized and it has been realized by the various stakeholders in the education community.

The Educational outcomes through digital transformation are an area of interest for the educational researchers and the rapid innovations and state-specific projects for meeting the Covid-19 challenges with digital resources have been an area for exploration. The above specific initiatives at the regional level highlight the digital readiness of the stakeholders and
the acceptability of the educational community for integrating technology into education. Teachers’ creative abilities and willingness to address the pandemic challenges with meaningful and available resources is a significant part of these programs. There is a need to empower teachers to develop locally relevant programs for quality education. Teachers are our last and best hope to bring qualitative changes in education.

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