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Education in Crisis: The Effect of the COVID-19 Pandemic on NGO-led Universal Primary Education Initiatives in Delhi-NCR

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Abstract
The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted global education systems, and its ramifications were especially critical in developing countries like India. This study examines the impact of the pandemic on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating universal primary education initiatives in the Delhi-NCR region, focusing specifically on Delhi, Noida, Ghaziabad, and Gurgaon. NGOs have long served as vital conduits for filling educational gaps in underserved urban and peri-urban communities. However, the unprecedented challenges posed by lockdowns, digital divides, health crises, and funding shortages exposed the fragility of NGO-led educational systems. Through a mixed-methods approach incorporating statistical analysis of NGO performance data, interviews with stakeholders, and policy review, this paper explores declines in enrollment, dropout trends, digital readiness, funding alterations, and learning outcomes. The study finds that while many NGOs innovated rapidly to adapt, the sector as a whole saw a severe regression in its universal education objectives. Recommendations are offered for enhancing resilience in the NGO education sector, improving government-NGO collaboration, and investing in long-term digital inclusion.

Keywords*: COVID-19, NGO education, universal primary education, Delhi-NCR, educational inequality, digital divide*

I. Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic has left indelible marks across every sector of society, with education standing among the most profoundly affected. As governments enforced lockdowns and physical distancing, schools worldwide closed their doors to more than 1.6 billion learners, triggering a paradigm shift in how education is delivered (UNESCO, 2020). The crisis not only interrupted learning but also exacerbated existing inequalities, especially in low-income and marginalized communities. In India, where the Right to Education Act (2009) enshrines free and compulsory education for children aged 6 to 14, the pandemic has severely undermined this constitutional promise. The situation is particularly alarming in urban peripheries like Delhi-NCR (National Capital Region), where socio-economic disparities and infrastructural deficits converge, amplifying the educational impact of the crisis. Within this context, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have historically played a vital role in bridging educational gaps and complementing governmental efforts to achieve universal primary education. With the advent of the pandemic, NGOs have had to recalibrate their strategies to continue serving the educational needs of vulnerable children. This research delves into how the pandemic affected NGO-led educational initiatives in Delhi-NCR and evaluates the effectiveness, adaptability, and resilience of these interventions in promoting universal primary education during unprecedented times.

1.1 Background of the Study

India has made significant strides in increasing access to primary education over the past two decades, with rising enrollment rates and declining dropout rates. Yet, systemic challenges such as poverty, gender inequality, child labor, and lack of infrastructure persist, impeding the achievement of truly universal education. NGOs have often stepped in to supplement state capacity, particularly in urban slums and underserved areas. Delhi-NCR, with its complex socio-economic tapestry, has been both a microcosm and a magnifier of India's educational disparities. Before the pandemic, NGOs in the region engaged in a variety of educational initiatives ranging from setting up informal learning centers and running bridge programs to community engagement and digital literacy campaigns. However, the onset of COVID-19 disrupted these programs, introducing new layers of complexity to an already challenging mission. The shift to online education revealed stark digital divides, with many students lacking access to devices, stable internet, or conducive learning environments.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

While extensive research has been conducted on the general impact of COVID-19 on the Indian education system, there remains a paucity of focused studies on NGO-led interventions at the primary level, especially in urban hubs like Delhi-NCR. This study seeks to fill that gap by investigating how the pandemic affected the operations, outreach, and outcomes of NGOs working towards universal primary education. It aims to explore the adaptive strategies employed, the challenges encountered, and the long-term implications for educational equity and access.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the pre-COVID roles and contributions of NGOs in promoting universal primary education in Delhi-NCR.
2. To assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on NGO-led educational initiatives.
3. To evaluate the digital and community-based strategies adopted by NGOs during the pandemic.
4. To identify the key challenges faced by NGOs in continuing primary education support.
5. To suggest policy and operational recommendations for strengthening NGO interventions in post-pandemic educational recovery.

1.4 Research Questions

1. How did NGOs contribute to universal primary education in Delhi-NCR prior to COVID-19?
2. What were the immediate and long-term impacts of the pandemic on their educational initiatives?
3. How effective were the digital and alternative strategies implemented by NGOs during the pandemic?
4. What constraints hindered the outreach and effectiveness of NGO programs during the crisis?
5. What lessons can be drawn to improve NGO resilience and educational outcomes in future emergencies?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This research holds critical significance in the realm of educational planning and policy, especially in light of future crisis preparedness. NGOs have consistently served as catalysts of social change, particularly in the education sector. Understanding their experiences, challenges, and innovations during the pandemic offers valuable insights into creating a more inclusive, adaptive, and resilient educational ecosystem. The findings can inform government agencies, international organizations, and civil society actors committed to ensuring uninterrupted education for all children, regardless of socio-economic background. Moreover, the Delhi-NCR region, with its mix of affluence and acute deprivation, offers a unique laboratory for studying educational interventions under stress. The lessons drawn from this region may have broader applicability in other urban contexts, both within India and globally.

1.6 Scope and Delimitation

This study focuses exclusively on primary education (classes 1 to 5) and the role of NGOs operating within the geographical confines of Delhi-NCR. It does not extend to secondary or higher education, nor does it delve into government or private school management in depth, except where such interaction influences NGO initiatives. The study period is confined to the timeline of the pandemic (March 2020 to March 2022), capturing the immediate and medium-term impacts on education.

1.7 Conceptual Framework

The study is anchored in the Human Capital Theory and the Capability Approach. Human Capital Theory posits that education enhances individual productivity and societal development. The Capability Approach, advanced by Amartya Sen, focuses on expanding people's freedoms and opportunities, emphasizing the role of education in enabling human flourishing. Together, these frameworks provide a lens for evaluating the effectiveness of NGO-led education programs in expanding access, agency, and future opportunities for children during the pandemic.

1.8 Methodology Overview

The research adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys of beneficiaries and NGO staff with qualitative interviews and case studies. The data collection involves purposive sampling of major NGOs working in Delhi-NCR, supported by policy reviews, program reports, and secondary data from government and international agencies. Analytical tools include thematic analysis for qualitative data and descriptive statistics for quantitative data.

1.9 Data Analysis :

Table 1: Average Enrollment (Pre-COVID vs Post-COVID) by City

City	Pre-COVID Enrollment	Post-COVID Enrollment
Delhi	626.00	395.00
Ghaziabad	530.75	312.25
Gurgaon	606.17	390.50
Noida	627.20	405.60

This table presents a comparative analysis of average student enrollment across four cities — Delhi, Ghaziabad, Gurgaon, and Noida — before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The data illustrates a consistent decline in enrollment figures across all locations. Ghaziabad witnessed the steepest drop, from 530.75 to 312.25 students on average — a 41% reduction — suggesting either a higher rate of migration, limited technological readiness, or weaker community-based educational support. In contrast, Noida, with the highest post-COVID enrollment average (405.60), appears to have deployed more resilient or scalable intervention strategies. Gurgaon and Delhi also saw significant declines, though not as dramatic. These findings underscore how the pandemic disproportionately impacted vulnerable educational ecosystems. Enrollment is a key indicator of NGO reach and operational continuity, and this table clearly signals systemic disruption. The disparities across cities imply differences in program adaptability, community trust, and infrastructure for remote education. Moreover, this drop may reflect socioeconomic challenges, including parental unemployment, reduced household income, and inadequate support for online transition. Therefore, NGOs need targeted, city-specific recovery strategies, especially in cities like Ghaziabad, to address the deep-rooted digital divide and learning loss triggered by the pandemic.

Table 2: Device Access Rate & Dropout Rate by City

City	Device Access Rate (%)	Dropout Rate (%)
Delhi	59.60	17.16
Ghaziabad	37.87	16.09
Gurgaon	49.17	14.84
Noida	45.91	15.93

This table explores the relationship between device access rates and dropout rates among primary students in Delhi, Ghaziabad, Gurgaon, and Noida. Interestingly, Delhi exhibits the highest digital access (59.60%) but also one of the higher dropout rates (17.16%). This discrepancy highlights that access alone is insufficient for educational continuity; digital literacy, motivation, content quality, and family support are equally critical. Ghaziabad has the lowest device access (37.87%) and a relatively moderate dropout rate (16.09%), reinforcing its position as the most vulnerable in terms of infrastructure. Gurgaon, with mid-range device access (49.17%) and the lowest dropout rate (14.84%), may have leveraged better teacher engagement or community support to retain students. Noida falls between these trends, suggesting that while technology matters, it is the interplay of digital infrastructure, pedagogical adaptability, and student support that determines outcomes. The dropout rates — ranging from 14.84% to 17.16% — are alarmingly high compared to pre-COVID norms (7–10%), underscoring the urgency for digital inclusion, remedial programs, and community-led interventions. NGOs must invest in blended learning models and parental engagement to mitigate dropout risks and foster re-enrollment in a post-pandemic educational environment.

Table 3: Teacher Availability & Online Learning Hours by City

City	Teacher Availability (%)	Avg Online Learning Hours/Week
Delhi	85.48	8.20
Ghaziabad	79.65	7.00
Gurgaon	77.42	9.67
Noida	81.79	8.20

This table captures teacher availability and corresponding online learning hours per week across the four studied cities. Delhi shows the highest teacher availability (85.48%) and averages 8.20 hours of online learning per week, while Gurgaon, despite having the lowest teacher availability (77.42%), reports the highest online learning duration (9.67 hours). This inverse relationship suggests that Gurgaon likely employed more structured or asynchronous learning methods, enabling extended learning periods with limited faculty. Ghaziabad, once

again, is at the lower end of performance, averaging just 7.00 hours, despite a moderately available teacher base (79.65%). This could point to poor digital content quality or a lack of training among educators to engage effectively in remote learning. Noida matches Delhi in average online hours but has slightly lower teacher availability, showing relative stability. The average online learning time across cities remains below 10 hours/week, far from a comprehensive learning experience for primary education. This highlights the need for capacity building among NGO teachers, innovative e-learning platforms, and adaptive pedagogical strategies. Teacher engagement — both in quantity and quality — will remain a cornerstone of learning recovery as NGOs move towards hybrid models in a post-pandemic world..

Table 4: Average Funding Change by City

City	Avg Funding Change (%)
Delhi	-14.96
Ghaziabad	-24.82
Gurgaon	-21.02
Noida	-16.11

The data presented in Table 4 reveals a concerning trend of reduced funding across all cities under study, with Ghaziabad experiencing the most significant average funding cut at -24.82%, followed by Gurgaon (-21.02%), Noida (-16.11%), and Delhi (-14.96%). The uniformity of negative percentages across the board underscores the widespread financial strain faced by NGOs in the region, likely due to shifts in donor priorities or pandemic-related constraints. Ghaziabad's steep decline correlates with its underperformance in other development indicators, suggesting that funding reductions may have exacerbated existing structural issues or reflected donor disengagement due to poor impact outcomes. In contrast, despite facing a funding cut of nearly 15%, Delhi managed to maintain greater operational stability. This may be attributed to better financial management, strategic resource reallocation, or leveraging external partnerships, particularly from corporate social responsibility (CSR) channels and governmental schemes. The comparative resilience of Delhi hints at the importance of institutional capacity and diversified funding portfolios in withstanding fiscal shocks. Overall, this table underscores that while all cities suffered, outcomes varied significantly, implying that contextual adaptability and governance structures play a vital role in mitigating the impact of funding shortfalls on educational interventions.

Table 5: Total Community Outreach by City

City	Community Outreach
Delhi	10,667
Ghaziabad	6,697
Gurgaon	12,992
Noida	11,797

Table 5 offers a quantitative assessment of community outreach efforts across four urban centers. Gurgaon leads the chart with 12,992 individuals reached, followed by Noida (11,797), Delhi (10,667), and Ghaziabad (6,697). The high outreach numbers in Gurgaon and Noida reflect a more vigorous grassroots mobilization, potentially supported by better organizational networks, volunteer participation, and localized awareness strategies. These cities appear to have effectively bridged the gap between service providers and marginalized communities, suggesting a strong on-ground presence of NGOs and allied institutions. Interestingly, Delhi, despite being a well-resourced capital city with relatively better digital infrastructure, lags slightly behind in outreach. This may suggest a reliance on tech-based interventions such as digital learning modules and mobile outreach, which, while innovative, may not always ensure direct community engagement, especially in areas with low digital literacy. Ghaziabad's limited outreach further supports the narrative of overall programmatic underperformance, possibly due to weaker civil society engagement or fewer NGOs operating within the area. This table highlights the essential role of localized and in-person outreach in supplementing educational programs and suggests that successful interventions require both infrastructural support and community trust to maximize impact and inclusion..

Table 6: Program Type Distribution by City

City	Bridge Course	Digital Learning	Regular Schooling	Remedial Classes
Delhi	1	1	2	1
Ghaziabad	1	1	1	1

City	Bridge Course	Digital Learning	Regular Schooling	Remedial Classes
Gurgaon	2	2	1	1
Noida	1	1	2	1

Table 6 presents the distribution of various educational interventions—Bridge Courses, Digital Learning, Regular Schooling, and Remedial Classes—across Delhi, Ghaziabad, Gurgaon, and Noida. A diverse array of programs is observed in all cities, pointing toward a multifaceted approach adopted by NGOs to meet heterogeneous learning needs during and after school closures. Regular schooling dominates across Delhi and Noida with two instances each, reflecting a push toward restoring conventional education pathways. Digital learning is uniformly present in all four cities, emphasizing the growing reliance on technology to address access gaps. Notably, Gurgaon exhibits a heavier focus on Bridge Courses (2) and Digital Learning (2), suggesting a targeted attempt to address learning discontinuities through short-term, intensive interventions and tech-enhanced strategies. This may have been driven by higher dropout rates or academic regression among vulnerable children in that region. Ghaziabad, by contrast, shows a flat distribution (1 across all types), possibly indicating limited capacity or a lack of specialization in programming. The data reflects the agility of NGOs in responding to shifting educational demands through a mixed-service delivery model, while also highlighting disparities in program depth and focus. These patterns underscore the necessity of context-sensitive education planning during post-disaster recovery periods..

Table 7: Digital Initiative Adoption by City

City	No	Yes
Delhi	2	3
Ghaziabad	3	1
Gurgaon	3	3
Noida	3	2

Table 7 reveals the level of digital initiative adoption by NGOs in each city. Delhi and Gurgaon showed the highest balance in digital engagement, with 3 NGOs each adopting digital strategies. Gurgaon, in particular, achieved full parity with three digital and three non-digital organizations, signaling a flexible, hybrid model of education delivery. Delhi similarly leaned toward digital innovation, reflecting the city's broader infrastructure advantages and institutional capacity. Ghaziabad, on the other hand, had only one NGO that adopted digital learning, while three remained non-digital. This low digital uptake is consistent with the city's poor device access, higher enrollment drop, and reduced outreach efforts as seen in other tables. Noida fared slightly better with two digital adopters, but the overall picture suggests room for stronger digital transformation. This data underscores the pivotal role of digital strategies in educational continuity, particularly during crises such as COVID-19. Cities with a greater share of NGOs utilizing online platforms tended to report better engagement metrics. The findings suggest that digital readiness is not merely a technological investment but a strategic imperative. To build resilience, NGOs must prioritize digital capacity-building, supported by donor funding and government collaboration, especially in digitally lagging zones like Ghaziabad.

Table 8: Correlation Matrix

	Pre	Post	Device Access	Dropout	Funding	Online Hrs
Pre-COVID Enrollment	1.00	0.89	0.15	0.12	0.07	-0.02
Post-COVID Enrollment	0.89	1.00	0.31	-0.10	0.25	0.10
Device Access Rate (%)	0.15	0.31	1.00	-0.52	0.29	0.50
Dropout Rate (%)	0.12	-0.10	-0.52	1.00	-0.26	-0.43
Funding Change (%)	0.07	0.25	0.29	-0.26	1.00	0.11
Online Learning Hours	-0.02	0.10	0.50	-0.43	0.11	1.00

The correlation matrix in Table 8 presents insightful interrelationships between key variables. The strongest positive correlation is observed between pre- and post-COVID enrollment (0.89), indicating that regions with strong pre-pandemic enrollment levels maintained relative strength during the crisis. Notably, device access rate has a moderate positive correlation with post-COVID enrollment (0.31) and online learning hours (0.50), while showing a strong negative correlation with dropout rate (-0.52). This confirms the critical role of technology in sustaining educational participation and minimizing disengagement. Conversely, dropout rate exhibits negative correlations with both device access and online hours, highlighting that limited digital resources significantly elevate dropout risks. Funding change displays a weaker positive correlation with digital access (0.29) and post-

COVID enrollment (0.25), suggesting that while funding does contribute to better outcomes, its impact is mediated by how effectively it is allocated. Interestingly, the correlation between pre-COVID enrollment and digital access (0.15) is minimal, indicating that historical enrollment strength does not guarantee digital preparedness. This table demonstrates that multi-dimensional strategies—especially enhancing device access and digital content—are more effective in retaining students during emergencies than funding alone. It reinforces the notion that digital equity is central to educational resilience..

Table 9: Enrollment Change by City

City	Enrollment Change	Enrollment Change (%)
Delhi	231.00	36.91
Ghaziabad	218.50	41.16
Gurgaon	215.67	35.55
Noida	221.60	35.33

Table 9 quantifies the enrollment changes across four cities, highlighting both absolute and percentage declines. Ghaziabad experienced the highest relative drop at 41.16%, followed by Delhi (36.91%), Gurgaon (35.55%), and Noida (35.33%). These figures reflect the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on primary education enrollment, particularly among NGO-led initiatives. Ghaziabad's stark decline aligns with its low digital adoption, high funding cuts, and limited community outreach, painting a picture of systemic vulnerability. While Delhi and Gurgaon had higher pre-COVID enrollment figures, their percentage drops suggest that even well-established systems were not immune to disruptions, though they managed comparatively better retention. Noida showed the smallest proportional decline, potentially reflecting stronger adaptability and community mobilization. These statistics confirm that while enrollment losses were widespread, their magnitude varied based on structural capacity, digital access, and program flexibility. It also underscores the urgency for NGOs and local authorities to invest in contingency strategies that safeguard enrollment continuity, such as hybrid models, digital outreach, and community engagement. Without proactive measures, setbacks in enrollment could reverse years of progress toward universal primary education, particularly for vulnerable children in under-served regions like Ghaziabad.

Table 10: Summary by Program Type

Program Type	Pre-COVID Enrollment	Post-COVID Enrollment	Dropout Rate (%)	Device Access (%)
Bridge Course	532.25	336.75	16.39	50.88
Digital Learning	574.40	379.60	14.63	61.28
Regular Schooling	723.50	474.50	17.13	36.88
Remedial Classes	526.50	337.50	15.49	42.38

The program-type breakdown in Table 10 offers key insights into how different educational models performed before and after the pandemic. Digital Learning programs recorded the highest post-COVID retention (379.60) and the lowest dropout rate (14.63%), along with the highest device access rate (61.28%). This demonstrates the strength of digital-centric strategies in maintaining educational continuity under crisis conditions. Conversely, Regular Schooling, while having the highest pre-COVID enrollment (723.50), faced the highest dropout rate (17.13%) and the lowest device access (36.88%). This disparity highlights the difficulty traditional schooling models faced in adapting to remote contexts without sufficient technological support. Bridge Courses and Remedial Classes served as transitional models, with moderate performance across all indicators. Notably, Bridge Courses had above-average device access (50.88%) and a manageable dropout rate (16.39%), suggesting their role in plugging learning gaps and re-engaging students. The data affirms that flexibility and digital readiness are critical to program success during disruptions. Programs that were pre-equipped or quickly transitioned to digital platforms fared better, while rigid models suffered. Future preparedness should include blended models that combine the accessibility of remedial support with the scalability of digital learning.

Table 11: Summary by Digital Initiative

Digital Initiative	Pre-COVID Enrollment	Post-COVID Enrollment	Device Access (%)	Dropout Rate (%)
No	613.70	369.20	36.39	17.79
Yes	577.67	381.67	61.87	13.18

Table 11 provides a comparative look at NGOs that adopted digital initiatives versus those that did not. The difference in outcomes is both striking and instructive. NGOs that implemented digital strategies had a lower

dropout rate (13.18%) compared to non-digital organizations (17.79%), alongside significantly higher device access (61.87% vs. 36.39%). Moreover, post-COVID enrollment was slightly higher in digital adopters (381.67 vs. 369.20), despite these NGOs serving fewer students pre-COVID. This suggests that digital readiness played a key role in educational resilience, enabling smoother transitions during school closures and lockdowns. The drop in enrollment was less steep for digital adopters, indicating their ability to maintain engagement through remote instruction and tech-enabled learning tools. In contrast, non-digital NGOs faced steeper declines in both access and retention, likely due to an inability to pivot quickly during the crisis. These trends make a strong case for institutional investment in digital infrastructure, training, and content development. They also point to the necessity of policy-level support, particularly in underfunded or low-tech areas. This table reinforces the broader conclusion that digital adaptation is no longer optional for NGOs—it is a critical determinant of program sustainability and educational equity during crises..

II. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a litmus test for the robustness of alternative education providers in India, particularly NGOs. In Delhi-NCR, the pandemic exacerbated structural inequalities, widened the learning divide, and exposed critical vulnerabilities in NGO-led educational systems. While a few organizations pivoted rapidly and innovatively, the overall sector experienced regressions in enrollment, learning outcomes, and operational capacities. The absence of cohesive state-NGO strategies further weakened collective responses. This crisis underlined the need for inclusive, tech-enabled, and community-driven education models. Future resilience lies in strengthening digital infrastructure, fostering multisectoral collaboration, and embedding socio-emotional learning into primary education. The findings of this study underscore the imperative to reimagine NGO education strategies not just for recovery but for transformation. A multi-stakeholder, equity-focused approach must guide post-pandemic educational reconstruction to ensure no child is left behind.

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