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Research Article

Learning Interest among SC/ST Secondary School Students of Bengali Medium Schools in the Post-COVID-19 Era

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic created a serious disruption in the global education system. Due to the rapid spread of the virus, schools were closed for a long period, and the teaching-learning process shifted from traditional face-to-face instruction to a digital learning method. This sudden change created many challenges for students, especially those belonging to socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The present study focuses on the learning interest of Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) students studying in Bengali medium secondary schools in the post-pandemic period. The study was conducted on a sample of 200 students selected from different Bengali medium secondary schools. A descriptive survey method was applied, and data were gathered using a structured questionnaire. The findings show that although digital learning methods helped continue education during the pandemic, many SC/ST students faced multiple barriers, including a lack of smartphones, poor internet connectivity, financial problems, and limited digital knowledge. These problems influenced their learning interest and academic engagement. The study also highlights that the pandemic increased educational inequalities among students. Therefore, there is an urgent need to develop an inclusive and technology-supported education system that ensures equal learning opportunities for SC/ST students studying in Bengali medium schools. The study suggests that educators and policymakers should develop supportive and adaptive educational environments to bridge the post-pandemic learning gap and enhance learning interest among disadvantaged learners.

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KEYWORDS: Learning Interest, Post-COVID-19 Education, Academic Motivation, Online Education

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic created a global crisis of exceptional magnitude, affecting almost every area of human life. The virus was first identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, and quickly spread to many countries within a short span of time. Considering the rapid transmission of the virus and the increasing number of infections, the World Health Organisation (WHO) officially declared it a global pandemic on 11 March 2020. The pandemic affected the health sector significantly, affecting economic activities, social systems, and educational systems worldwide.

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in India was reported on 30 January 2020. As infection rates steadily increased, the Government of India implemented a nationwide lockdown beginning from 24 March 2020 to control the spread of the virus. The lockdown was implemented under the provisions of the Disaster Management Act, 2005, which restricted movement and public gatherings. The implementation of section 144 allowed authorities to restrict large public gatherings and maintain compliance with safety protocols. Although these actions were important for ensuring public safety, they significantly disrupted everyday life and affected various sectors of society.

Among all sectors, the education system was one of the most severely affected. Educational Institutions, including Schools, colleges, and universities, were closed for a long time period in order to minimise physical contact and prevent the spread of infection. According to reports by UNICEF, schools in about 188 countries were temporarily closed during the pandemic period, affecting a vast number of learners across the world. Although children were relatively less affected by severe infection, the closure of educational institutions created significant learning gaps and affected normal academic activities.

Educational inequalities became more significant during the pandemic period. Those students come from economically weaker sections and marginalised backgrounds, facing greater challenges. In the Indian context, students belonging to the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) communities face multiple socio-economic barriers. These students study in government Bengali medium schools, where technological resources are often limited. During the pandemic period, when many educational institutions shifted from traditional to online platforms, a large number of students from these backgrounds were unable to participate effectively due to the lack of digital devices, poor internet connectivity, and a lack of a supportive learning environment at home.

Global reports suggested that approximately 46.3 crore school children worldwide were unable to access digital learning during the pandemic period because they did not have sufficient technological resources. In developing regions, particularly in South Asia, the problem was even more severe. Many families faced economic difficulties due to job losses and reduced income, resulting in some students discontinuing their studies or engaging in work to support their households. As a result, marked by learning deficit, decreased academic motivation, and

growing risk of school dropout became major concerns in the post-pandemic period.

Learning interest plays a vital role which influences to students' academic engagement, motivation, and achievement. When students develop curiosity and genuine interest in learning, they are engaged more actively in classroom activities and perform better academically. However, extended school closures, lack of interaction with teachers and students, and restricted access to educational resources during the pandemic may have led to a decrease in students' interest in learning. These challenges were especially significant among marginalised students who were already faced with structural disadvantages in the education system.

During the post-COVID-19 period, educational institutions have steadily reopened and are working toward the normal teaching-learning activities. However, students' learning experiences have been significantly changed due to the pandemic. Many learners are affected by academic gaps, psychological stress, and reduced motivation towards education. Hence, it's essential to investigate how the pandemic has affected students' learning interests, especially among socially disadvantaged communities.

This research focuses on SC/ST secondary school learners studying in Bengali medium institutions. These groups of students often face multiple forms of disadvantage, including economic challenges, limited educational facilities and inadequate access to digital technology. Analysing their level of learning interest after the pandemic period can offer valuable insights into the challenges faced by marginalised learners and help identify strategies to support their academic improvement.

This present study aims to explore the learning interest of SC/ST secondary school students in the post-COVID-19 context and analyse the factors that influence their motivation towards education. This study investigate how digital inequality, family background, school environment, and access to learning resources affect students' engagement with education. The findings of this study may help educators, policymakers, and researchers design more inclusive educational policies and support systems to improve learning opportunities for disadvantaged students in the future.

2. Definition of Terms

2.1. Learning Interest

Learning interest refers to a student's curiosity, motivation, and willingness to participate in learning activities. It influences students' attention, engagement, and academic performance in school. Students with high learning interest show more participation in classroom tasks and study regularly. Learning interest is influenced by teaching methods, school environment, family support, and availability of learning resources. After the COVID-19 pandemic, digital learning and access to technology also became important factors affecting students' learning interests.

2.2. Post-COVID-19 Education:

Post-COVID-19 education refers to the teaching and learning system that developed after the COVID-19 pandemic. In India

and many other countries, schools reopened with a greater use of digital tools, blended learning and flexible teaching methods. This period focuses on recovering learning loss, improving students' engagement, and strengthening both classroom and technology-based education.

2.3. Academic Motivation:

Academic motivation refers to the internal and external factors that encourage students to learn, complete academic tasks, and achieve educational goals. It influences students' effort, persistence, and interest in studies. High academic motivation helps students remain engaged in learning and improves their academic performance. "According to *David McClelland* and *John William Atkinson*, achievement motivation is the inner drive that encourages individuals to achieve success and performance in their activities."

2.4. Online Education

Online Education refers to a mode of learning in which teaching and learning take place through digital platforms using the internet. Students attend classes, access study materials, and interact with teachers through smartphones, computers, or other digital devices. During the COVID-19 pandemic, online education became an important alternative to traditional classroom teaching in many schools and educational institutions.

3. Rationale of the Study

SC/ST students represent marginalised sections of Indian society. Educational deprivation, poverty, parental illiteracy, and limited academic resources challenged their ongoing learning process. These inequalities were increased during the pandemic. Understanding students' learning interests after the pandemic helps to inform educational policies and develop inclusive teaching methods.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- O1 To examine the level of learning interest among SC/ST secondary school students in Bengali medium schools after the COVID-19 educational context.
- O2 To examine the influence of online education and digital learning resources on the learning interest of SC/ST secondary school students.

5. HYPOTHESES

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between online education and the learning interest of SC/ST secondary school students of Bengali medium schools in the post-COVID-19 educational context.

H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between access to digital learning resources and the learning interest of SC/ST secondary school students.

6. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

6.1. RESEARCH DESIGN

The present study adopted a descriptive survey method to investigate the learning interest of SC/ST secondary school

students in the post-COVID-19 educational context. This method was considered appropriate as it helps to collect relevant information from a defined group of students and analyse the relationship between online education, access to digital learning resources, and students' learning interests.

6.2. Population of the Study

The population of the study consisted of SC/ST secondary school students studying in Bengali medium schools of Purba Medinipur and Paschim Medinipur districts.

6.3. Sample of the Study

A total of 200 SC/ST secondary school students were selected as the sample for the present study.

6.4. Sampling Technique

The stratified random sampling technique was used to select the sample. In this technique, students were initially categorised based on relevant variable such as gender and class level, and then sample were randomly selected from each group to ensure proper representation in the study.

6.5. Tools of the Study

Data were collected using a Learning Interest Scale developed by the researcher. The instrument included multiple items measuring to students' interest in learning, engaging in online education, and access to digital learning resources.

6.6. Data Collection Procedure

The data were collected from the selected students with prior permission of the respective school authorities. Participants were proper guided about how to answer to the questionnaire.

6.7. Statistical Techniques Used

The analysis of the collected data was conducted using statistical techniques such as Mean, Standard Deviation(SD), and Correlation analysis to examine the relationship between learning interest and access to online educational resources.

7. Analysis and Interpretation of Data

Appropriate statistical techniques including Mean, Standard Deviation (SD), and Pearson's Correlation in order to explore the relationship between online education, access to digital learning resources, and the learning interest of SC/ST secondary school students in Bengali medium schools in the post-COVID-19 educational context.

Table 1

Level of Learning Interest of SC/ST Secondary School Students			
Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Learning Interest	200	68.45	8.72

Interpretation:

The above table shows that the mean score of learning interest of SC/ST secondary school students is 68.45 with a standard deviation of 8.72. This indicates that the students possess a

moderate level of learning interest in the post-COVID-19 educational situation.

Table 2

Relationship between Online Education and Learning Interest			
Variables	N	r-value	Level of Significance
Online Education and Learning Interest	200	0.46	Significant

Interpretation:

The calculated correlation coefficient ($r = 0.46$) indicates a moderate positive relationship between online education and the learning interest of SC/ST secondary school students. Therefore, the null hypothesis stating that there is no significant relationship between online education and learning interest is rejected.

Table 3

Relationship between Access to Digital Learning Resources and Learning Interest			
Variables	N	r-value	Level of Significance
Digital Learning Resources and Learning Interests	200	0.52	Significant

Interpretation:

The obtained correlation value ($r = 0.52$) shows a positive and significant relationship between access to digital learning resources and the learning interest of SC/ST secondary school students. Hence, the null hypothesis stating that there is no significant relationship between access to digital learning resources and learning interest is rejected.

9. MAJOR FINDINGS / RESULTS OF THE STUDY

1. The study revealed that SC/ST secondary school students possess a moderate level of learning interest in the post-COVID-19 educational context.
2. A significantly positive relationship was observed between online education and the learning interest of SC/ST students.
3. The result also showed a significant relationship between access to digital learning resources and students' learning interest.
4. Students who had better access to digital learning resources showed increased learning interest in the post-pandemic education system.

10. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

- The study was involved limited sample of 200 SC/ST students, which may not fully generalize all SC/ST students in diverse regions.
- The data were collected only from two districts of Purba Medinipur and Paschim Medinipur in West Bengal which may have limited the generalization of the findings.
- The study concentrated only on SC/ST secondary school students and did not include comparisons with students belonging to other social groups.

- The data were collected through student's self-report, the responses may have been influenced by personal perceptions and opinions.
- The study primarily concentrated learning interest and academic motivation in the post-COVID-19 context and did not comprehensively analyze other variable such as family background, parental support, and school resources .
- The study was carried out within a short time period, which limited the opportunity for a more comprehensive or longitudinal investigation.

11. CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic created major challenges for the education system and significantly disturbed the regular learning process of students around the world. In the India context, the unexpected shutdown of schools and the shift towards online learning exposed existing inequalities in access to educational resources. Students from marginalized communities, especially those belonging to SC and ST groups, faced increased difficulties due to restricted access to digital devices, internet connectivity, and lack of supportive learning environments.

The results of the present study suggest that the learning interest of SC/ST secondary school students studying in Bengali medium schools has been influenced by the educational disruptions caused by the pandemic. Although reopening of school and return to classroom teaching in the post-COVID period. A significant number of students continue struggle with learning gaps.

The study points to the importance of providing inclusive educational support to socially disadvantaged learners to improve their engagement with education. Enhancing digital access, improving school learning environments, and providing academic support can play a vital role in increasing student's learning interest after the pandemic period.

Overall, the study highlights the need for well-designed educational policies and supportive mechanism to bridge learning gaps and ensure that marginalized students are able to participate effectively in the teaching-learning process in the post-COVID-19 educational scenario.

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