



COVID-19 pandemic and experiences of social science researchers: A reflection

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Abstract

Covid-19 pandemic has forced almost all the ways of our thinking, behaving and working. Although it is proved that pandemic impacted over people of all walks of life, the present paper is focused on research scholars' overall experiences about their study endeavour in general and their frame of reference and lived experiences in particular. It also reflects on how the teaching-learning experiences got affected by this pandemic and how Indian Universities tried to overcome the challenges posed by it. The present reflective papers aim to raise the issue of challenges and change of social science research methodologies and execution.

Keywords: COVID-19, research, pandemic, scholars, methodologies

Introduction

Now, it is not only the fact that Covid-19 impacted everyone for one or other reason but also realized reality. It's a city of Wuhan, China where this virus got identified and gradually spread in other parts of the earth. While monitoring its rate of spread and death tolls, the World Health Organization has declared Covid-19 as public health emergency of international concern in January and in March 2020 declared as pandemic (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020) ^[1]. After this declaration, sooner or later all the countries have started taking regimes on their respective Pandemic Control Acts. When the early research reports and consultations with WHO about its prevention, control and medicine; countries involved in education, awareness, prevention strategies to control the spread and death toll.

When realized that the spread is because of human contracts, the forced physical distancing, work from home, wearing masks, sanitizers, washing hands regularly and avoiding gatherings thought to be lifesaving activities. No doubt, that this pandemic has affected every individual, every sector unprecedentedly and its impact was huge. The education sector in general and higher education in particular which got affected and suffered a lot because of this pandemic. Survey estimations from UNESCO (McCarthy, 2020) ^[2, 10], Team Lease (2021), IIE (2020) ^[17], AUI (2020) revealed pressing situations in education sector that most of the teaching-learning experiences of learners are hampered or blocked, in some cases learners are thrown out of stream of education. This is not only because of Covid-19 pandemic but other pre-existing realities about infrastructure and governance issues in India which scaled up this learning deficit in the country.

This emergency situation almost forced higher educational institutions to go for blended learning, online mode of teaching-learning after when UGC asked all HEIs to extend the dates of final examinations and mid-term examinations (Crawford *et al.*, 2020) ^[3, 11]. Most of the Universities have gone for online examinations but there are examples of some Universities who went for offline examinations. Whatever has happened was not favourable either students, parents or teachers and higher educational institutions. But, most of the colleges has adopted the new pattern of teaching-learning and even research experience, social science research is not exception for this. This article aims to reflect on social science research phenomenon, what has happened with it and discuss its repercussions.

What Social Science Researchers Do?

Social science is a science of society, social relationships and social behaviour. It is expected in social science to study and interpret the human behaviours in the spectrum of social, cultural, psychological, economical and political systems which guides individual, groups, communities, states, nations in their vary actions.

Social science researchers are the scholars who intended to explore the relationships between people and their problems. Usually, subjects like sociology, anthropology, education, social work, economics, political science have linked with the social science researches. Research scholars from these disciplines try to explore associations between socio-demographic, cultural variables which have bearings on their socio-political positions which make them vulnerable for many things. Such findings are very much instrumental for conceptualizing, designing and execution of new developmental policies and programmes.

Social science researchers are studying about why some communities are targeted for something? Why women have to leave their jobs? Does parents' education level have something to do with achievement of their children?

What happen after de-monetization? What made someone to become a terrorist? What are determinants of people's political participation? Why people are being cheated by bankers? What are the processes of 'othering'? What are the intersectionalities involves in gender and sustainability studies? etc. Sometimes, they intended to do experimental/ interventional researches to have better choices, models, strategies of dealing with human and institutional problems.

Which engaging is such vast and wide areas of research, such scholars need fieldwork. Fieldwork is integral and vital part of social science research. But in covid-19 pandemic period; where social distancing, lockdowns, avoiding crowds and permissions made social science researchers to drop down their fieldwork and extension activities. This impacted a lot.

Challenges posed by Covid-19

No doubt that Covid-19 pandemic has almost changed everything ranging from our thinking, our habits, entertainment even ways of learning. This section is largely based on the discussions and informal talk with the social science research scholars.

As said earlier that social science research involves things like *observation*, continuous observation. This pandemic made scholars to keep aside the study related observations of people. Because of this they feel missed out the valuable insights about their study.

Defining problem of study and developing hypotheses need a constant reading, discussing and reflecting over with study supervisor and the other prominent persons in the field but because of this pandemic scholar are not allowed to meet either supervisors or field experts. This made them feel insufficient about their study area and lack of theoretical framework for their study.

The next is actual data collection, scholars have to drop the traditional, primary method of data collection based on physical observation, interviews, focused group discussions, referrals, participatory methods. These methods of data collection are prime for social science researches to draw the meaningful conclusions and suggestions for future studies.

Course work, the universities and research centres are forced to go with online teaching-learning mode in lockdowns. University teachers, research centres are made rush to acquire the knowledge and skills required for online teaching, research and assessments. Many universities have organized their course work online. Scholars have to be pointed in their questions and teachers are also have to be short in their responses. This developed a feeling that somewhere mind is restricted, no wings for thoughts etc. The control, reasoning, understanding about subject matter has left questionable.

Studies which have intervention or experiment part, are hold till the situation comes under control. Tools like public participation, participatory rural appraisal, rapid rural appraisal, community organization events, flash mobs, SOWT analysis etc. have become mirage. Such studies suffered from logic, logistics and effectiveness issues.

Although, there are limitations but the availability of smartphones, high configured computers, laptops and most importantly the availability and affordability of Internet facilities^[18], data usages and their cost^[19], facilities at university and research centres posed questions of equitable opportunities of teaching-learning for scholars (Singh, 2010; Khan and Mohakud, 2020)^[5, 6].

Bridging the Gaps: Virtual platforms

World has accepted that the Covid-19 is a huge pandemic of this time, and every country have to evolve with new plans of action for different sectors. Here are some experiments executed in the field of higher education.

The Government of India through its HRD Ministry, UGC taken numerous initiatives to cater the educational need of the students. The Inter-University Centres, Information and Library Network (Inflibnet), Consortium for Educational Communication (CEC) platforms being made available to students, researchers and teachers (Dhoot, 2020)^[7, 15].

For human live interactions, to surpass the physical distancing norm, research centres and universities have taken help of technological advancements like Zoom, Googlemeet, Cisco WebEx for maintaining the teaching-learning interactions and experiences. Faculties and scholars both have to be more pro-technology for this process. Somehow the teaching, discussions and clearing research related doubts were quite possible through these online platforms. Course work is the classic example of utilizing such online platforms.

For sharing resource materials, lecture notes and ppts, pdfs, google drives, Whatsapp groups, Telegram groups are used. For assessment, corrections, suggestions the emails, Microsoft word document files are used for comments. Some Youtube videos, Swayam platform, e-Gyankosh, Gyandhara, e-Pathshala, Swayamprabha, e-Shodh-Sindhu, Google handouts, Moodles are used to support the teaching-learning experiences of scholars (Tari and Amonkar, 2021)^[4, 12].

Where the research participants are educated, techno-savvy, can fill questionnaire the Google forms, Jotform, Survey Gizmo, Zoho Survey or other professional site (www.surveymonkey.com) for online data collection are used. This change in data collection has posed challenges of authenticity of the responses but still used widely. We must say that these technological devises have helped scholars to complete their data collection work.

For data processing and refinements, scholars have told to register themselves for online faculty development programs, research methodology workshops, training programs on SPSS, R-software, Amos etc. to equip scholars for better analysis and interpretations, and also for better presentations. One good thing happened as

expressed by research scholars that in the period of Lockdowns, and work from home period there were ample opportunities they got to raise themselves in connection with functional skills related to data handling, different software's free and paid, referencing software's, meta-analysis workshops, making quality publications, publication ethics and plagiarism etc.

Conclusion

We have to accept the reality that education sector is changing its face in the new millennia. Covid-19 pandemic has just speeded up that change with massive speed and pressure. The traditional ways of learning and doing social research are modifying and researchers are quite accommodative towards the advanced technology coming into it. Though, it is painstaking, shaking the primitive landmarks, frame of references, doing and experiencing research, today it is established fact that technology is going to interfere in methodologies of social science researches. It is also noted and expressed by research scholars that this new dawn helped them in their research endeavours therefore, we have to welcome the new trends, advances coming to social science research.

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