

Lost generation fears as COVID locks out India's poor students



CS Satheesha, who built a treehouse in his back garden to get a better signal for his online classes, gives a lesson in Kodagu district, Karnataka [File: Manjunath Kiran/AFP]

New Delhi, August 6 (RHC)-- CS Satheesha spells out "A-P-P-L-E" into his phone as he teaches remotely from the only place he can get a signal -- a treehouse in his back garden in southern India.

In a country where schools have been shut for more than a year, one of the longest shutdowns in the world, she and her fellow pupils are among the lucky ones. According to a report earlier this year by UNICEF, only one in four children in India has access to digital devices and the internet.

Many families have sold their belongings or taken out loans to buy smartphones for their children to continue their education. In some rural areas, children have been trekking miles up hills and through snake-infested jungles to try and connect to their teachers.

Jean Dreze, a welfare economist, said the situation is bound to exacerbate the already “extreme inequalities” in access to education that reinforce India’s class, caste and gender divisions.

“By and large, privileged children are able to continue learning through online education. For poor children, however, online education is a fiction, and no other arrangements have been made for them in most states,” Dreze told the AFP news agency.

Even before the pandemic, more than six million Indian girls and boys were already not going to school, according to UNICEF. Almost 30 percent of those who did go dropped out, with rates for girls and for children from the most marginalised communities higher still.

The pandemic and the heavy blow to the Indian economy – and to the poor who have suffered most of all – have only made things worse. With breadwinners out of work, many families have had little choice but to make children drop their books to help make ends meet.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that there has been an increase in child marriage – meaning one less mouth to feed – and trafficking too.

The fear is that many children will not return to education even when schools eventually reopen, creating a “lost generation” of unqualified young people. “If they feel they cannot catch up, they’re less likely to go back to school,” said Terry Durnnian, chief of education, UNICEF India.

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