

A Study on Challenges and Opportunities of Online Classes Among Madrasa Students

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Abstract : *The twenty-first century is the era of online learning and artificial intelligence, the entire world is in the race of digital as well as technological advancement. Though the education system of India might have not prepared for such advancement, the global COVID-19 pandemic forced the world to set up a digital online learning platform for every education sector across the world, and this was possible because of this sudden lockdown. The sudden lockdown has brought an educational crisis among educational institutions. This study has highlighted the issues, challenges, and opportunities the Madrasa students have faced during that time, and how such challenges became opportunities for many. A comprehensive literature was reviewed and primary data was collected, through an open-ended online questionnaire in Google form, which was sent to the students through email and Whats App to get detailed information, for this, a purposive sampling was used, an option was given to write in Hindustani (Indian Language), in the Google form, later the language was transcribed into English and thematic analysis was done to get the result. This study finds that technical barriers, limited access to devices, and inadequate training for teachers create substantial problems, but enhanced accessibility and flexible learning environments provide an opportunity for the integration of online education in Madrasas.*

Keywords: Madrasa, COVID-19, Technology in Education, National Education Policy 2020, Sustainable Development Goal-4.

INTRODUCTION

Madrasas are the old concept of Islamic and religious teaching, along with other fields, including different languages, Mathematics, Science and other subjects. Now these institutions are following modern teaching concepts for Islamic education that significantly influence the development of young minds. Rapid shifting to online classes during the pandemic brought significant challenges for both students and teachers. Many of them have faced technological barriers, difficulties in adapting to new virtual environments, and struggles to maintain engagement. On the other hand, students in Madrasas also experienced some advantages, such as greater access to educational materials, more flexible schedules, and tailored learning experiences. This study seeks to delve into the nuances of how online classes have transformed within the Madrasa framework. The worldwide impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic has forced educational institutions to accept online educational platforms as a response to tackle the lockdowns and mobility restrictions imposed by the Government. Data shows that 91% of students worldwide were impacted by school closures, underlining the massive migration to online learning (Mushtaha et al., 2022). In institutions like Madrasas, the transition to an entirely online environment introduced distinct challenges. Teachers and students alike had to adjust not only to new technology but also to the entirely different mental and physical demands of virtual learning (Zeka, 2023). This research delves into the challenges and opportunities presented by this shift, looking for ways to seamlessly incorporate online classes into the Madrasa system while ensuring the preservation of their valued traditions. This study intends to identify the primary technological, pedagogical, and socio-cultural challenges that Madrasa students experience in online classes. It investigates the perceived opportunities and possible benefits for their learning outcomes, accessibility, and religious knowledge acquisition. Also, it explores these students' experiences, which have historically been centred around engagement and cultural immersion. It looks at the challenges (technology, pedagogy, cultural acclimatization) as well as the opportunities (more resources, flexible scheduling, individualized instruction). The ultimate goal of this study is to ensure that these valued customs are maintained by paving the road for the seamless integration of online learning. By doing this, it hopes to further our understanding of online learning among various cultures and enhance the educational experience for Madrasa students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Having modern methods of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is now rather crucial for efficient learning in today's technologically developed society, by actively engaging learners with dynamic information. ICT promotes deeper comprehension and meaningful knowledge acquisition. As a result, rapid advancement in ICT has significantly affected and enhanced student learning methods (Nikhat and Khan, 2020). The growing popularity of online education has led to an obvious rise in the number of courses available at colleges and universities. It is important to underline that choosing online courses is a conscious choice reflecting contemporary trends and recognizes the evolving needs of institutions and students, not a forced necessity (Agustina and Cahyono, 2017). A study by Tartari & Kashahu, (2021) identified several challenges in online learning, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic period, highlighting issues such as accessibility, lack of motivation, and difficulties in engaging with online group work activities, the use of mobiles limited screen time due to small size of the screen as well as the poor quality of the internet speed had minimised their effectiveness in learning. Along with all the difficulties these online classes had flexibility as well as accessibility to enhance student centered learning and provide diverse learning opportunities miles away. Jindal and Chahal (2020) performed a study on the "Challenges and Opportunities for Online Education in India," highlighting numerous critical elements that facilitate the expansion of online learning. Factors include enhanced internet accessibility, reduced expenses, convenience in course completion, and governmental efforts. However, the study highlighted other problems, including inadequate resources, limited chances for social contact, problems with credibility, and a lack of motivation among learners. Online education may be greatly enhanced by reducing distractions, enforcing discipline, enhancing technical skills, managing time effectively, and soliciting student feedback. There is still a long way to go until the government has improved digital infrastructure and guaranteed equitable access to online education. Improving digital infrastructure and making sure all students and educators have access to necessary equipment and software is a top priority according to the (National Education Policy, 2020).

Since the early days of the internet in the 1990s, e-learning concepts and terms like online learning, remote learning, and internet based learning have been around, but it was the pandemic that turned these ideas into a necessity for keeping education going. The Teachers and the schools have always quickly adopted the technology as main source of teaching and assessing the students to bridge the learning gap that happened due to the lockdown. This digital shift made digital tools important for education in a way that was not used before, helping students stay connected to their studies despite unprecedented challenges (Khan et al., 2021). The online education system has been transformed through advancements that are beyond the fundamental connectivity and into the global platform offering students a unique platform in terms of time, pace, and location. Online platforms were quickly adopted and smoothly integrated into teaching methods thanks to their adaptability and accessibility. But having these resources at hand doesn't guarantee that learning will take place (Haung, 1997; Jindal and Chahal, 2018). The most common challenges the users have faced were access to the internet, the speed of the

internet, and digital devices, like smartphones, computers etc. which has directly limited the use and participation in the online education method. There were difficulties due to the home environment such as personal space, and the absence of traditional classroom interaction between the students, which has directly affected their learning. Several factors such as longer screen time, affect their health, including eye strain and headaches, while the impression of longer online class hours compared to offline classrooms adds to dissatisfaction with the online learning experience. Key problems include poor access to digital tools and consistent internet, which greatly limit participation in online courses. Students also mentioned problems with their home learning environment, including a lack of personal space and the absence of conventional classroom interactions, which adversely influence involvement and learning results. Furthermore, extended screen time raises health risks like eye strain and headaches; while the view of lengthier online class hours compared to offline classrooms helps to explain discontent with the online learning environment (Abishek et al., 2024). The efficacy of online education for Madrasa students is a matter of concern due to the obstacles associated with accessibility and class levels. In the past, online education frequently consisted of recorded lectures; however, the pandemic has prompted a transition to interactive, classroom based instruction, which presents both opportunities and challenges for Madrasa students. This study is essential for understanding the obstacles and opportunities associated with online learning for Madrasa students, and it will ultimately inform strategies to improve accessibility, improve learning outcomes, and facilitate the acquisition of knowledge (Ulum, 2022).

Jindal and Chahal's (2020) examination into "Challenges and Opportunities for Online Education in India" throws light on key elements impacting the country's digital learning ecosystem. Their research identifies numerous significant factors driving the growth of online education, including ubiquitous internet access, affordability, course convenience, government assistance, and employer recognition of online certificates. Despite the positive trend, the study identifies substantial barriers to the smooth integration of online education. Issues such as poor infrastructure, restricted chances for social contact, questions about the trustworthiness of online courses, and difficulty in sustaining motivation emerge as strong barriers to the efficacy and sustainability of digital learning platforms. Opportunities and challenges in the education sector were brought to light by the sudden shift to distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although technology made it possible for the teaching-learning process to continue even in the absence of physical classrooms, it also revealed serious challenges. Poor internet connection, limited access to digital infrastructure, a lack of support or desire, and low technical abilities were among the common problems. Despite these obstacles, online learning provides students with flexibility and convenience, enabling them to study from any location. It also helped India's digital education industry expand, resulting in job possibilities (Jain & Sharma, 2022).

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To identify the challenges faced by Madrasa students in shifting from physical to virtual online classes in terms of technological pedagogical factors
2. To find out the opportunities and potential benefits of online classes among the Madrasa students and their

impact on their learning outcomes, accessibility, and knowledge gain.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A descriptive research design with qualitative research method was used, to find the challenges and opportunities of online education among Madrasa students. An *open-ended questionnaire* was designed in Google form with open-ended questions, which was shared among the Madarsa students through email and Whats App messages, who have passed out in the last five years or are currently enrolled in Madrasas, the researcher has received 16 responses from different Madrasa students, the window was open to type in Urdu or Urdu-English typing mode (Hindustani language), to express their experiences, problems, and adaption techniques, challenges and opportunities of an online learning system. Non-probability sampling method was used in which the purposive sampling technique was used to choose respondents. This method made it possible to pick individuals with a good knowledge of information and expertise related to the study's goals. *Sample Size on Data Saturation*, the appropriate sample size from the response sheet was chosen. By this, it was indicated that data collection was continued until no fresh themes or insights were revealed. The required number of responses were taken to achieve data saturation and 13 responses were taken for the study to complete. Thematic analysis was used to do a qualitative data analysis, which included the following: Transcription, coding, development of themes and data interpretation.

All the filled recordings from the google form were verbatim transcribed. The transcripts were coded through open coding by looking for recurrent themes, patterns, and important ideas related to online learning system challenges and opportunities, also the Respondents were coded as "R-1" for the first and "R-2" for the second respondent likewise the number continued till R-13 for the 13th respondent. To coherently arrange the data, codes were classified into themes and sub-themes. The major conclusions of the study were summarized in these categories. The objectives of the study were used to interpret and characterize the themes and sub-themes that were found, providing insight into how the online education system worked as challenges and opportunities for them.

Ethical Consideration: Individual dignity, informed consent, confidentiality, and the ability to withdraw from the study or deny to fill, were all scrupulously observed throughout the research procedure. The name of the participants was not mentioned in the study, only the term "R" was used for each respondent to keep their confidentiality.

DISCUSSIONS

SHIFTING TOWARDS THE ONLINE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN THE MADRASAS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF ONLINE CLASSES

The COVID-19 pandemic affected all educational institutions, including Madrasas, and prompted a swift transition to online learning. The present study examines the complex experiences of Madrasa students as they move to a virtual learning environment, examining the challenges they face as well as any possible opportunities.

Challenges of Online Classes

Technological Barriers: It highlights barriers caused by limited access to digital infrastructure. Factors such as limited internet access in distant or economically disadvantaged

locations, along with a paucity of computer equipment, provide substantial barriers. Mastering technological nuances, such as platform usage and troubleshooting, complicates the online learning experience.

R-1 "My Madrasa is in Lucknow, but I am from a rural area, in our house we use normal keypad mobiles, there is no access to the internet, and the data price was hiked up to Rs. 300-500, as per the required data at that time, in my family one of my cousins was using a smartphone, I used to request him for an hour to learn the "Tajweez" & "Kirat" online that too not for daily, because some times he used to go for work, and that day I had to miss my class, but my friends have suggested me to watch "YouTube" for learning online many channels are having recorded lessons. I have followed and these recorded lessons from other teachers have helped me. These were the common challenges I had to face every day during the lockdown."

Respondent-1(R-1) has mentioned about the technological barrier he has faced during the lockdown justifying the challenges he has faced, it was not easy for everyone to afford a smartphone and everyone belongs to a different social class which was limiting their capabilities in achieving their goal. Some people have smartphones hardly they have sufficient data packs, due to hikes in prices people have limited their internet use, the respondent was using his cousin's phone for an hour, which shows finding a way out of nowhere if there is a will and there was support for him.

Pedagogical Challenges: It investigates the complications of successful education in online environments. Educators sometimes struggle to adapt to online teaching approaches because they are unfamiliar with digital instructional practices. The lack of face-to-face connection and the difficulties in maintaining student involvement pose significant challenges. Inconsistencies in material delivery and resource availability increase pedagogical inadequacies.

R-5 "The sudden shift from offline to online method of online education has brought many challenges for me and my Mufti Sahab, I am staying in a remote village; I do not have a smartphone, but a village friend of mine has a mobile repair shop, I have borrowed one mobile from him, which was an extra to him, but the charge was lasting for 2-3 hours after full charge; he asked me to replace the battery and use it, which was costing me 700 rupees; I was not having enough money to replace the battery, anyway, I did not bother to change it, as it was for temporary. Who knew it would take almost a year to get relief from the COVID-19 pandemic, in our village we have a poor internet connection and high fluctuation of the internet speed; to teach me in this it was difficult; the voice was breaking and the video used to get paused in between several times, which has irritated me every day. I used to climb on the tree some days, to get connectivity. Mufti Sahab and I both of us were not familiar with these online meeting generation links, we could directly do Whats App group calls, so that all the students could attend, in that too there was noise from the background, It was difficult to listen to the lessons. Mufti Sahab used to write in his notebook and used to share the image of his notes so that we could read and do our homework from that".

The lack of face-to-face connection, along with the difficulties of sustaining student interest, complicates the online learning environment. Discrepancies in material distribution and resource availability accentuate these

issues, resulting in pedagogical shortcomings. The personal experience of respondent-5 (R-5) significantly shows these concerns. Limited access to technology, such as smartphones and reliable internet connections, created huge barriers. It covers the difficulties of utilizing a borrowed mobile phone with limited battery life and coping with bad internet access, which affects the learning process. The lack of familiarity with online meeting technologies, as well as the dependence on alternative means such as WhatsApp group chats and handwritten notes, emphasize the challenges that students and instructors confront.

Sociocultural Influences: It emphasizes the effect of cultural and societal aspects on online class participation. Language difficulties restrict comprehension and active involvement, especially among linguistically diverse students. The lack of familial or cultural support for digital education techniques complicates matters. Sociocultural responsibilities such as family duties and employment commitments place time limits on learners, limiting their participation in online learning.

R-7 *"As a student from a village, that too of a Madrasa is not much considered as equal to the students studying in convent schools or Government schools, we study in Madrasa by choice and due to poor socio-economic conditions, our expenses are being covered by or Madrasa committee, from donations i.e. Zakat, (Type of Charity in Islam), we are valued more when we have the degree of Hafiz, Maulvi, Aalim, Fazil in the society more. I could not correlate the online classes to my real life, it was a big challenge when I was attending classes people thought I was just watching my mobile phone, but not studying. If there were guests or some urgent work came I had to leave my classes and do that work, my brother was going for work as a daily wage labour in the local market and he is the only person who is earning and also supporting my educational expenses, and I was the only male person at home at that time so I had no option but to leave and finish that urgent work. If there was a sudden death of a relative or any function I had to attend, I could not say no to my family member. Along with education, we have to look into other things which is also important in society to maintain social relations.*

The absence of familial or cultural support for online learning increases the problems, and sociocultural obligations, such as family responsibilities and work commitments, impose limitations on students by restricting their involvement. The management of the online learning environment is further complicated by technological and pedagogical challenges, as well as these social influences. These challenges are underscored in R-7's narrative, which addresses the social devaluation of Madrasa education in comparison to convent or government institutions, financial barriers, and the endeavour to integrate online education into daily life. It addresses the necessity of balancing academic pursuits with domestic responsibilities, the interruptions that result from household duties and engaging activities, and the cultural expectations that further disrupt the study process. It is important to address these social and cultural factors to enhance online learning engagement while maintaining accessibility and efficacy.

Overcoming the Technological Gap

The most urgent issue was the result of inadequate infrastructure. Students from remote areas did not have consistent access to the Internet, and low-income families

were unable to purchase computers or smartphones. Gaps in digital literacy were made worse by this digital divide. Unfamiliar with online platforms and technologies, both teachers and students struggled to navigate the virtual classroom.

R-3 *"The technology we needed wasn't there for us, but it was more than what we could afford in a village. In the era of 5G, speed internet connectivity, we get speed like 3G, I couldn't balance my education with the expectations of my family and society. Everyday felt like a struggle between wanting to learn and being pulled away by everything else. I didn't know how to make it all work, and it felt like I was losing control. People do not expect much from a Madrasa student, but a Madrasa student can do much more like a normal school-going or college-going student. My father has supported me, He wants me to become an "Aalim" (a religious scholar Muslim knowing the Quran and Hadith), he helped me to buy a smartphone, he did not discriminate against me, and he gave me whatever I was in need of for the online classes. He made us feel that if we want to overcome the challenges and need to improve ourselves we need to compete with the modern world, we must accept the change and try to fit in accordingly. Though my father is not much educated, only 5th standard passed, but his broad vision is making him an inspiration for me.*

Bridging the technological gap is important, especially for rural students who lack regular internet access and knowledge of digital technologies. The narrative of R-3 explains these challenges, especially those related to inadequate facilities and societal expectations. Despite these hurdles, R-3's father's gift of a smartphone shows the need to adapt to modern technologies for success in online education.

OPPORTUNITIES AND BENEFITS OF ONLINE CLASSES AND THE NUMBER OF OPPORTUNITIES ASSOCIATED WITH ONLINE LEARNING SYSTEMS.

Online classes enabled increased creativity and engagement. Educators who employed interactive online materials reported improved learning outcomes and increased student participation. Integrating social aspects, interactive tasks, and multimedia resources helped instructors create more engaging and dynamic virtual learning environments that encourage better subject understanding and retention.

Enhanced Flexibility and Accessibility: The emphasis is on the transformational power of online classes to overcome traditional limitations. Remote attendance eliminates geographical boundaries, allowing students to participate in classes from anywhere. Likewise, schedule flexibility allows students to adjust their studies to fit their own responsibilities. The versatility of online platforms enables tailored learning experiences that accommodate a variety of learning paces and styles.

R-11 *"As a student who has learned in both traditional and online settings, I found online education very convenient and easy to use. There were lots of tools available, and I could learn at my own pace. There were also fun tasks to do. Even though there were some problems, the general benefits were big, which made online learning a good experience."*

Online education has many advantages. It increases accessibility and flexibility, making it easier for students living in remote areas or with limited mobility to participate. The availability of a wide range of educational materials

on internet platforms allows for more personalized learning experiences. The versatility of online education removes geographical barriers and allows students to balance their studies with other responsibilities. R-11 highlights the many benefits of online education, despite its restrictions, by highlighting its ease and accessibility.

Broader Reach and Inclusivity: Emphasizes the democratizing power of digital education. Geographically distant students can now get access to Madrasa education through online channels, promoting inclusion and these platforms improve accessibility for students with impairments, ensuring equal participation and the adaptability of online learning accommodates to a variety of learning styles and demands, fostering an inclusive educational atmosphere.

Deepening Religious Knowledge Gain: Examines the enrichment provided by online resources in religious education. Access to a diverse range of online religious resources and experts broadens the breadth of study. The option to review previously recorded lectures and materials promotes deeper comprehension and reflection. The interactive learning methods boost engagement and increase the depth of religious information acquisition.

R-13 "As a student of religious education, online learning has considerably enhanced my knowledge of my religion. The internet provides me with many more materials than I would discover in a conventional classroom. With only a few clicks, I can access lectures, papers, and expert viewpoints to expand my knowledge. One of the most beneficial aspects of online learning is the opportunity to revisit recorded lectures. This has been really beneficial to me since I can go back, study, and reflect on classes at my own speed, allowing me to better comprehend complicated religious concepts."

Online learning helps education by letting students from all over the world go to Madrasa schools and taking away challenges for those who can't learn in person. It encourages equality by letting people learn in different ways. When it comes to religious education, having access to resources and experts on the internet is very helpful. Being able to listen to previously recorded lessons again helps people understand better. R-13 talks about the benefits of online learning, such as having access to a lot of materials and being able to watch classes again to better understand difficult religious topics.

Overall Experience and Improvement: Students' perspectives on how online classes have influenced their whole Madrasa experience, shaping both personal growth and religious education. Students' perceptions of the benefits and limitations of online learning might help them develop a better appreciation of its transformative potential to enhance their knowledge acquisition. This perspective sheds light on how, despite the challenges they provide, online programs have the potential to enhance access to religious studies by offering a flexible and modern educational experience.

CONCLUSION

The shift of Madrasas to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic brought a mix of challenges and opportunities. Students faced major challenges with technology, teaching methods, and cultural expectations, making it hard to adapt. Yet, the advantages of online education, like easier access, more flexibility, and tailored learning, offer real potential for Madrasa education. For online learning to truly work in Madrasas, it's important to

work together to close the technology gap, improve digital skills, create content that respects cultural values, and introduce creative teaching methods. By doing so, Madrasas can embrace the power of technology while staying true to their rich traditions.

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