

Online Classes In Higher Education In West Bengal During COVID-19 Pandemic Situation: An Explorative Study

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Abstract

An estimated 19 million college-going students in 508 general degree colleges including government, government-aided and self-financing under different universities and 92 engineering colleges including government and self-financing under different universities in the Indian state of West Bengal, who have all been at home since classes stopped across the Indian state of West Bengal from March 16, 2020, and no one knows when these educational institutes can reopen so far. With uncertainty over when students can go back to the classroom, educationists are thinking about remedial measures. In this situation, Online Classes have become the norm because of the COVID-19 pandemic. New challenges and opportunities have indeed emerged for educators, parents, and students, but we have also entered areas of many uncertainties. At one level, online classes will connect students, and on another, create limitations. This has made us reflect on the inequality not only in bandwidth, gadgets, and devices but also in the fact that most parents do not have the time or ability to support their children in this venture. Equity and access are bigger problems with online education. In this paper an attempt has been made to find out, 'is online education a viable alternative or not' in this contagion situation.

Keywords

Online Classes,
Higher Education,
COVID-19,
West Bengal.

Introduction

All educational institutes in the Indian state of West Bengal have been shut down since March 16, 2020, due to combat of the spread of Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and no one knows when these educational institutes can reopen so far. As a result, there are an estimated 19 million college-going students in 508 general degree colleges including government, government-aided and self-financing under different universities and 92 engineering colleges including government and self-financing under different universities in the Indian state of West Bengal, who have all been at home since classes stopped across the state from March 16, 2020. This COVID-19 has away from the wildest thoughts of mankind, changed the ways of living, working, teaching, and learning. Millions of students have been driven out of university and college campuses and the faculty are confined to their homes. This has strained the teaching community to look for alternatives to keep up the continuity in the teaching and learning process. This pandemic has forced all the teachers to work from home and to come up with new ways of imparting education. With uncertainty over when students can go back to the classroom, educationists are thinking about remedial measures. In this situation, Online Education has become the custom because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many institutes in West Bengal are offering online classes, but that has its own perils, though it is seemed by many educationists that with so many advantages in going online, this is the best time for Indian higher education institutes to build their digital charisma. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a great impact on the way students learn. New challenges and opportunities have indeed emerged for educators, parents, and students, but we have also entered areas of many uncertainties. At one level, online classes will connect students, and on another, create limitations. This has made us reflect on the inequality not only in bandwidth, gadgets, and devices but also in the fact that most parents do not have the time or ability to support their children in this venture. Equity and access are bigger problems with online education. In this paper an attempt has been made to find out, 'is online education a viable alternative or not' in this contagion situation.

Objectives of the study:

The objectives of this study are given below:

1. To know how many numbers of Higher Education institutions have started Online Classes for their students and its frequency and effectiveness of these Online Classes to their studies.
2. To know the regularity of the students and their classmates to participate in their institutional Online Classes.
3. To enquire about the barriers of Online Class.
4. To know the experiences of the students of their Institutional Online Classes.
5. To know the students' preference towards the different modes of education i.e. Classroom-Teaching Learning, Online Class, or both of them.

Methodology of the study:

At the beginning of this study we have formed a self-made questionnaire based on the objectives of this study. This study has done on those undergraduate students who are currently studying in different semester i.e. Semester-II, IV and VI of different courses like Arts, Science, Commerce, Engineering and different proficient courses like management and law, etc of different colleges under affiliated to different universities i.e. The Burdwan University, Rabindra Bharati University, Vidyasagar University, West Bengal State University, University of Calcutta, University of Kalyani and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad University of Technology (MAKAUT) across the Indian State of West Bengal. We have excerpted this data through online mode from the students throughout the month of June 4, 2020 to June 12, 2020. In this online survey, we have computed a total of 685 students' responses across the state. The collected data were then analyzed qualitatively through Microsoft excel version 2010.

Profile of the students under studied:

We have studied 685 undergraduate students of different courses across the Indian state of West Bengal, among these 685 students, male students are 197 i.e. 28.76% of the total sample and female students are 488 i.e. 71.24% of the total sample of this study. This is shown in the following figure 01:

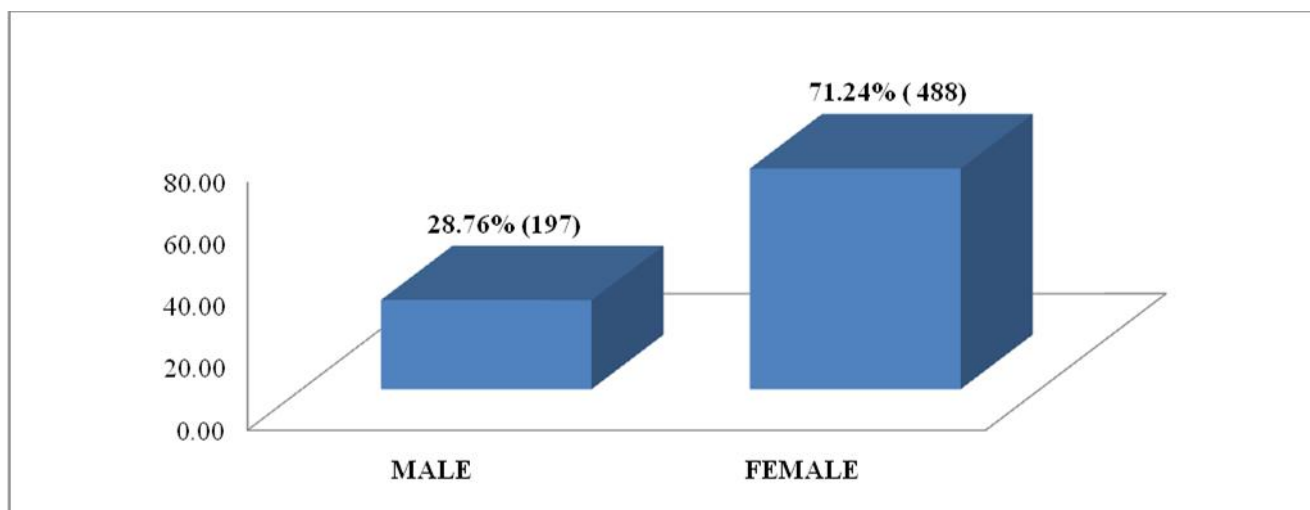


Figure 01: Profile of the Students under Studied with their Number along with Percentage

It is a very good indication that girls' child participation in this online explorative study is approximate 2.5 times higher concerning male students of the undergraduate level. It may be indicative of the high enrolment of girls children to the Higher education in the Indian state of West Bengal. Among these 685 respondents who are presently pursuing their different undergraduate courses in the Indian state of West Bengal, about 78% of the respondents belong to the Arts stream, whereas this is 19% in Science stream and 3% in other courses like management, engineering, and law, etc. Now if we look into the semester wise participation of the respondents in this study, it is found that 47.59% of respondents belong to Semester II of different undergraduate courses and about 40.73% and 11.68% students belong to Semester-IV and Semester-VI

studies respectively of different undergraduate courses across the state of West Bengal.

Findings and interpretations:

During this COVID-19 contagion situation online class has become the most popular alternative across the world. To keep up this in mind we first asked the undergraduate students under studied that have their institute taken any initiative of proper online class for them to reduce their academic loss and for the completion of their running semester's syllabus in this COVID-19 pandemic situation, in response to this question the scenario which has come up is depicted in the following figure 02:

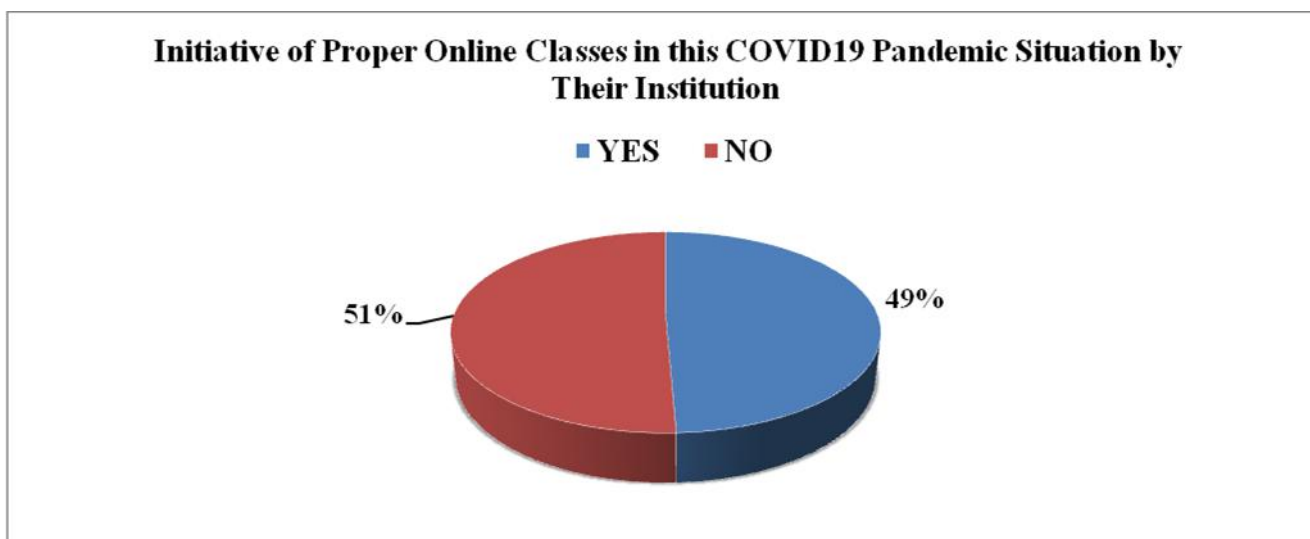


Figure 02: Status of Initiation of Online Class during COVID-19 pandemic Source: Primary Data

From the above figure 02, it is evident that about 51% of students understudied said that their institute has not taken any initiation regarding online class for them during this pandemic situation and 49% of students understudied said that their institute has started an online class for them. It is seen that more than half of the students understudied stated that their institution has not taken any initiative for an online class for them.

In this context we asked those students understudied who are presently attending their institutional online classes that do their institutional online classes effective in their studies, in response to this question the details findings are depicted in the following figure 03:

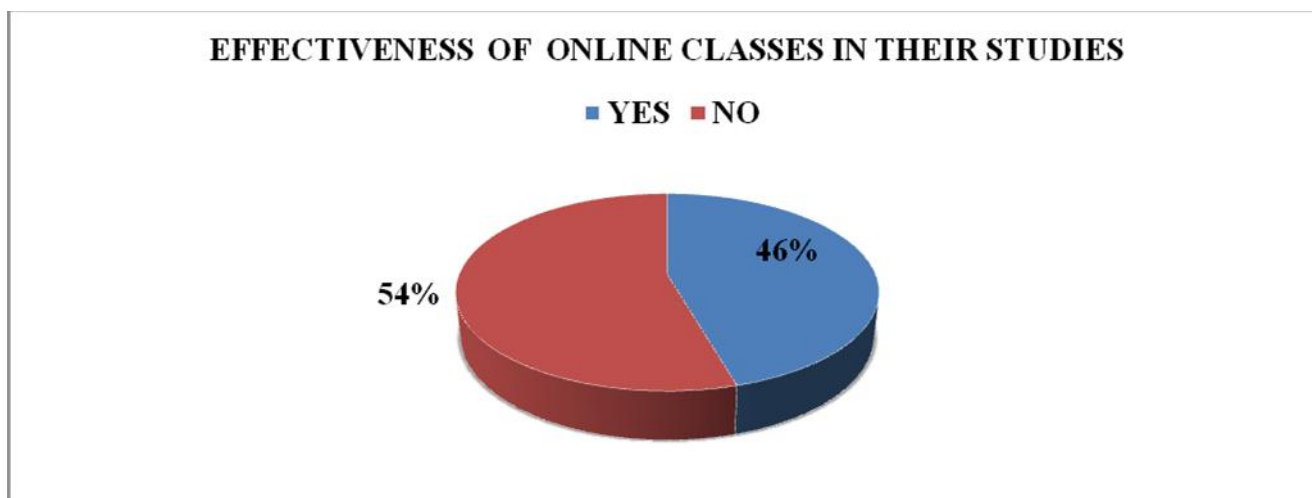


Figure 03: Effectiveness of Online Classes

Source: Primary data

The above figure 03 indicates that the majority of the students understudied i.e. about 54% do not get benefited from their institutional online classes. They opined that their institutional online classes do not effective in their semester related studies. About 46% of students under surveyed opined that their institutional online classes do effectively in their studies.

Now we look at the frequency of online classes, there it is seen that about only 16% respondents in this study said that their institute has organized their online classes for their students regularly, whereas 23% respondents said that their institute has organized online classes frequently and in this regard majority of the students under surveyed i.e. about 61% said their institutional online classes are very irregular. The details findings are depicted in the following figure 04:

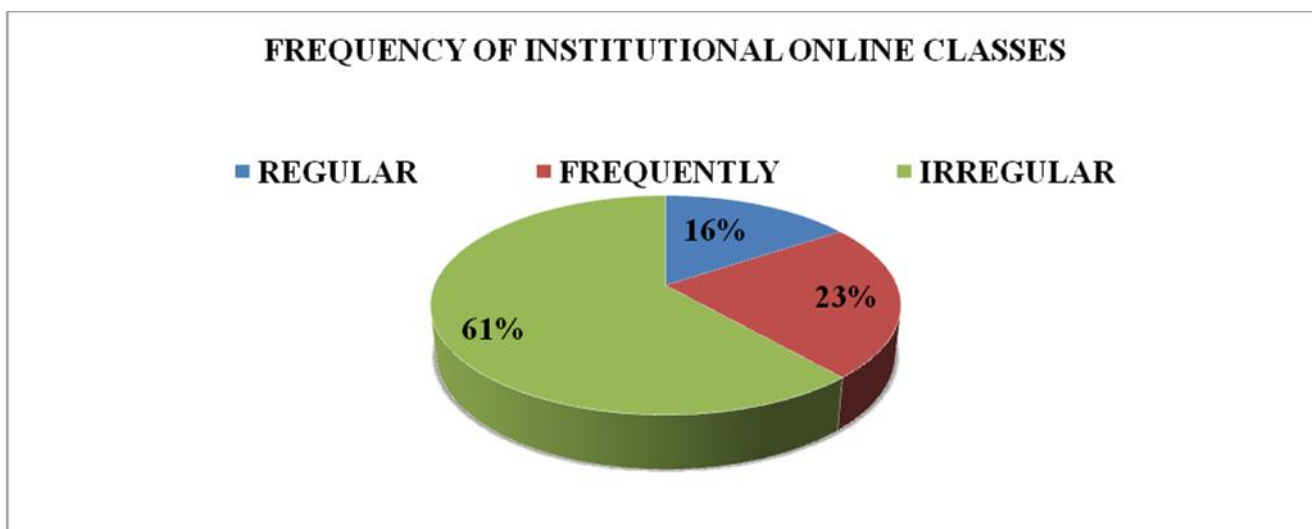


Figure 04: Frequency of Institutional Online Classes

Source: Primary data

When we asked the students that do they attend their institutional online classes regularly, in response to that their saying has compiled in the following figure 05:

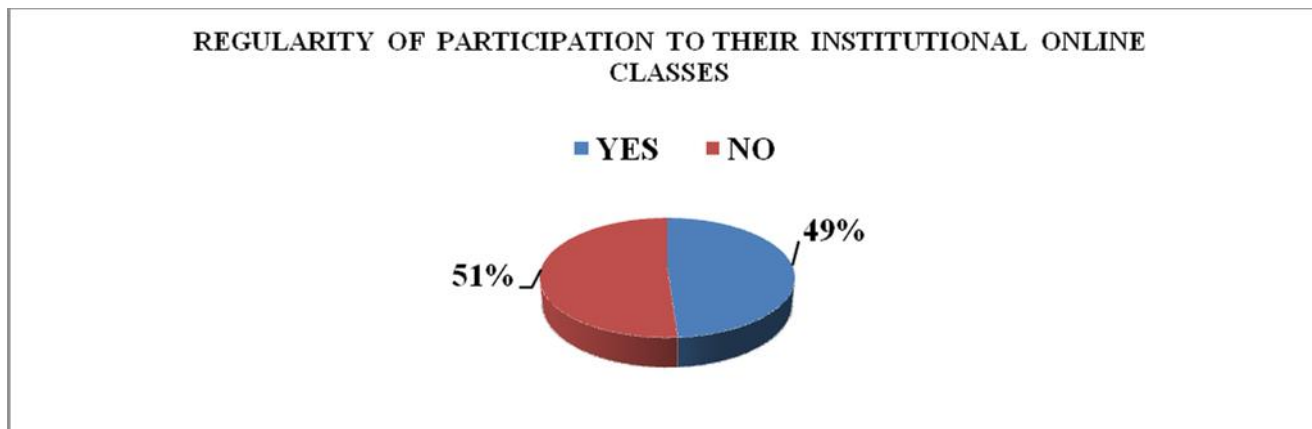


Figure 05: Regularity of Participation to Online Classes of their Institute Source: Primary data

It is found from the above figure 05 that more than half of the students understudied i.e. about 51% do not attend their institutional online classes. It may be these online classes do not attract them or they seemed that these classes do not help them or do not effective in their semester studies ultimately or it may also due to the irregular organisation of online classes from the institutional end and all students under their institutional purview do not get information from their institute that when their institutional online classes would be started or organised or it may be happened due to non-availability of proper electronic gadget like laptop, computer, tab or smart phone etc. on that time because there are huge families in West Bengal only with one smart phone and that would be used by their father or any elder member of their family in the most times or it may be happened due to poor internet connectivity in their locality because of so many reasons like the recent devastating super cyclone

storm, *Amphan* which attacked the Indian state of West Bengal on May 20, 2020 and this recent super-cyclone have devastatingly affected the electricity and mobile network connectivity at least seven adjacent district of Kolkata i.e. the whole south Bengal and this online survey was conducted after this severe super cyclone attack in West Bengal and most of the respondents of this online survey have come from south Bengal districts of West Bengal. Though, about 49% of students said that they attend their institutional online classes regularly when it has organized by their institute during this COVID-19 pandemic situation.

Further, we have inquired through the respondents of this explorative study that do all their classmates participate to their institutional online classes, in reply to this question the detail findings have shown in the following figure 06:



Figure 06: Respondents' Friends Participation in their Institutional Online Class Source: Primary data

Figure 06 indicates that the majority of the respondents understudied i.e. about 66% said that their class friends do not attend their institutional online classes and only 34% of respondents said that their batch mates take part in their institutional online classes. Thus it may be concluded from this finding that majority of the students have far away from their institutional online classes, which may be worried over a digital movement in education in India threatens to cut off a sizeable number of students, that

ultimately goes against the global movement of inclusiveness in education.

In this regard, we also try to know the reasons why their majority of classmates unable to participate in their institutional online classes through the respondents of this study. The result in this regard which evolved from their reply is shown in the following table 01:

Table 01: Reasons In Behind Their Friends Non-Participation to Their Institutional Online Classes

Reason	Percentage of respondents
Do not have any proper Electronic gadget (like SmartPhone /Tab /Computer/ Laptop etc.)	19.56
Poor Internet Connection in their locality.	42.19
Due to the communication problem from their institute.	16.64
Don't know	21.61
Total	100.00

Source: Primary data

From the above table 01, it is evident that about 19.56% students said that their friends' inability to take part to their institutional classes is due to the lack of proper electronic gadgets like a smartphone, tab, computer, laptop, etc. of them and about 16.64% respondents cited that it is due to the communication gap from their institute to their friends and about 21.61% respondents replied that they do not know about their friends' problem in behind their non-participation to their institutional online classes, whereas the majority of the respondents understudied i.e. about 42.19% said that it is due to the poor internet connectivity in their friends' locality.

internet and the digital divide. On quality, India ranks low in the global speed index (71st among 139 countries); while on broadband India is ranked 31st among 174 countries; however, it is an urban observable fact. In rural areas, India has made abysmal improvement in getting the broadband infra with Bharat Net. The bigger concern is the gap in internet penetration in urban and rural areas is 100% and less than 30% respectively. In this situation and also in these troubled times of COVID-19 pandemic have we raised India's digital divide furthermore in the field of higher education through online classes. It is a big question now.

In this context, we may cite a recent report made by IAMA-Nielsen India Internet-2019, where it is mentioned that India is faced with two challenges in terms of internet connectivity i.e. quality of the

In this study, we also try to know the experiences of the students to their institutional online classes. The detail findings in this field are depicted in the following figure 07:

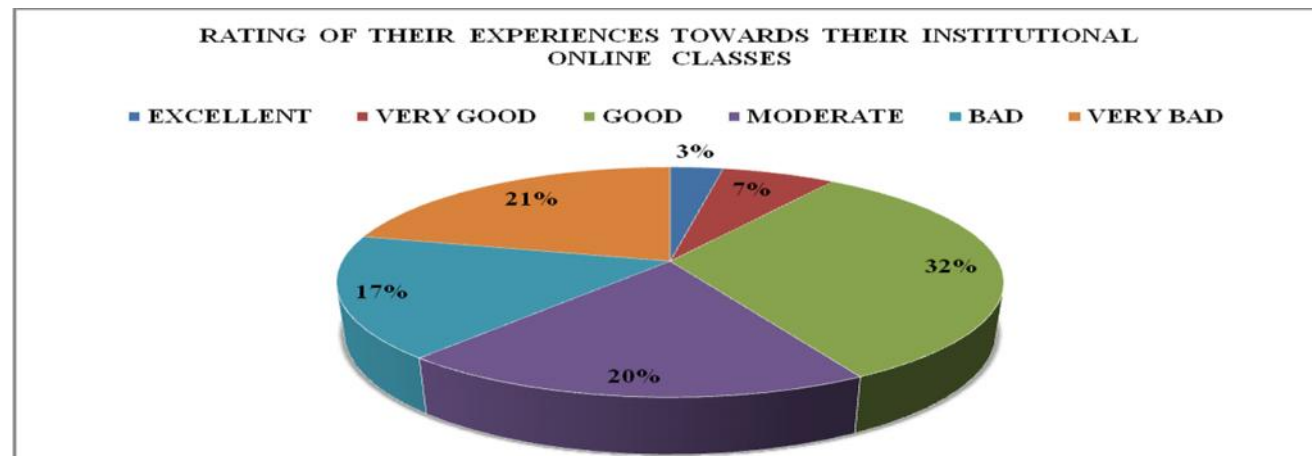


Figure 07: Rating of the experiences to their Institutional Online Classes

Source: Primary data

From the above figure 07, it has shown that about 3% students understudied rated their experiences towards their online classes by saying 'excellent', about 7% students rated 'very good' of their experience to their institutional online classes, about 32% and 20% students rated 'good' and 'moderate' of their experience to their institutional online classes. About 17% of students rated their experiences towards their online classes by saying 'bad' and about 21% of students shared their rating by mentioning 'very bad' to their institutional online classes. From this

divergent rating of the students understudied to their institutional online classes, it may be summarised that majority of the students i.e. about 57% experiences towards their institutional online classes are not well up to their satisfaction, needs, demands and easy accessibility of their institutional online classes.

In this explorative study, we also try to catch up with the opinion of the students regarding their preferences over the various mode of education like classroom teaching-learning, online classes, or amalgamations of both. The detail findings in this field have shown in the following figure 08:

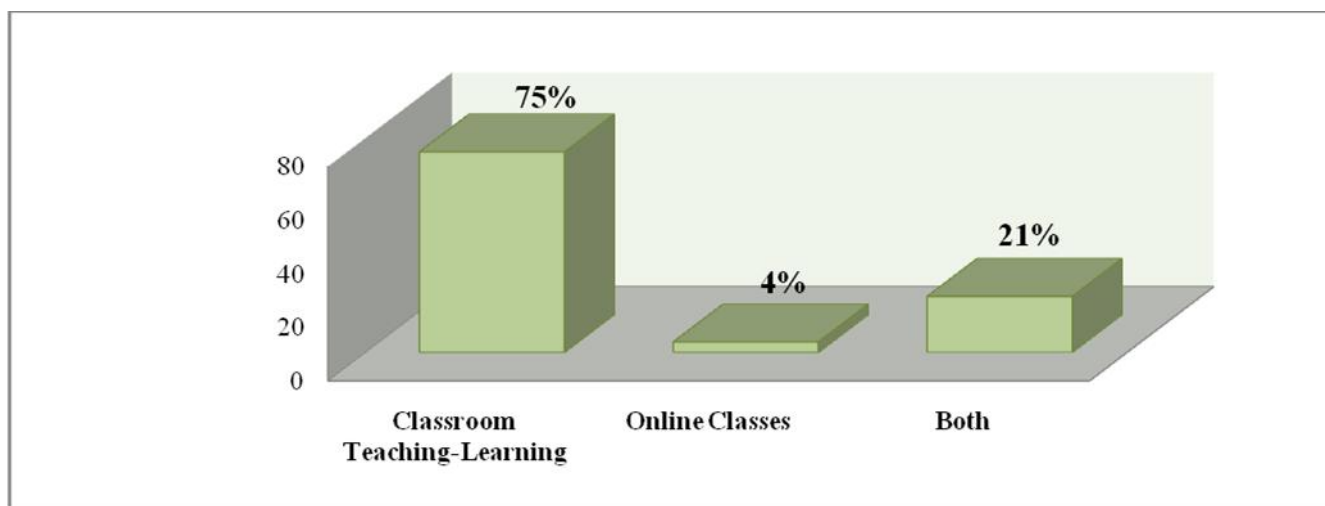


Figure 08: Opinion of Respondents (In %) Regarding Their Preference towards the Mode of Education, Source: Primary data

From the above figure 08, it has seen that majority of the respondents understudied i.e. about 75% preferred classroom teaching-learning only, and interestingly about 4% of respondents preferred online classes only. About 21% of respondents understudied have expressed their preference over both of them i.e. they want classroom teaching-learning and as well as online classes also.

Conclusion:

What a hideous system of education we have fashioned over the years. It confuses awakened intelligence with rote learning, inner flowing with grading, and life with pedantic knowledge. Is it, therefore, astonishing that even at this moment of the pandemic, when death is mere statistics and everything is upside down, the customary system cannot see beyond 'online classes' and the rule of examinations? It does not matter even if a 14 year old

class IX level girl from Malappuram district in the Indian state of Kerala commits suicide as she feels wounded because of her inability to attend online classes in this unequal society characterized by discriminating digital divide. This is not only one suicidal case reported in India due to related to online class. As reported so far, two tragic incidents have come to us, where a 15 year old class X level student in western Assam's Chirang district allegedly committed suicide after he failed to attend online classes and examination in the absence of a smartphone and a 16 year old class X level student from Nischinda area of Howrah district in the Indian state of West Bengal allegedly committed suicide after she failed to attend online classes in the absence of a computer or a smartphone. These online classes reveal India's digital divide. It has been seen in these troubled times of COVID-19 pandemic across the world, it

does not matter if very young students, their parents, and the larger society are experiencing severe mental stress, and there is widespread fear. We are told that online classes must go on with the same age-old syllabus that has to be covered and examinations must be conducted by anyhow.

From the findings of this explorative study, it may be said that the COVID-19 crisis underlines the urgency of more inclusive education. But it is the tragic reality that online classes are now broken inclusiveness. The system works for privileged urban students studying full-time, but today's are likely to be poor, rural, and first-generation learners. In the post COVID-19 world, we need a kind of education that radiates the spirit of love, care, and integral learning. The spirit of love-affirming has to be rescued from the pact of academic bureaucrats and traders of knowledge. All of us - parents, teachers, students, and concerned citizens, who still esteem the idea of a more life-affirming and ethically meaningful education, must stand together and put forward a new paradigm. Lastly, we may conclude our article by mentioning that educational institutes are larger ecologies that are both human and

cultural. And classrooms are palpable living ecosystems that are diverse in many ways. Clubbing them into one homogenous online model will bulldoze inclusivity, diversity, and dissent which are the essence of true education.

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