

Distance Education in the Indian Context

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Open and distance education systems are not complete strangers in the world of education today, but a reasonable appreciation of the overall potential of these systems is lacking even among the knowledgeable people. Without labelling the scepticism against these systems as abnormal, we think every distance educator should emphasise the various strengths thereof. It is with this need in view that we rate Prof Kulandai Swamy's presentation stimulating and encouraging. It may be noted that he does not see distance education as an 'alternative' to the conventional systems of education, instead for him it is a new educational movement, which has thrown up many questions, both theoretical and practical, for the distance educators to work on.

Distance education today has come to be accepted as a well recognised mode of education relevant to and necessary for meeting the emerging demands of the 'knowledge era'. It has shown a steep growth rate in the last two decades all over the world. As per CD-ROM data base received from the International Centre for Distance Learning, Milton Keynes, UK (February 1992), there are in 70 countries 374 distance education institutions offering 15,588 courses. This figure certainly is not exhaustive and the real position may comprise more countries, more institutions and courses. The increasingly growing importance of this system calls for a closer study of its characteristics, inherent potential and directions of development taking into account the educational needs of a country.

The conventional university system, starting with Oxford University, established in the U.K. and others in Europe has a history of nearly eight centuries. Whatever be the systems of education that existed in ancient China, India, the Middle East, Greece and Rome, the universities all over the world today are but the images of the modern universities in the U.K. and Europe. Consequently, there is near uniformity in the administrative structure, instructional methods and categories of awards for academic programmes. Perhaps the only major departure is the system of affiliated colleges that is unique to India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. On the other hand the Open Universities with an all too brief history, exhibit considerable variations and diversities between one country and the other. Many models have come into existence. These institutions respond more readily to the local requirements and seem to adapt themselves more easily to local needs and changing demands.

Though 'Open University' as an institution is now taken for granted as known and understood, there still is considerable lack of clarity on many issues and some simplistic concepts circulate even among the members of

the academic community. It is often thought of as an alternative, that too a weak alternative, to the conventional system – considered as an opportunity for those who were not successful in finding entry into the established colleges and universities where competition is formidable.

Backwardness, economic or social, has unfortunately inherent in it a perpetuating potential. Countries that are underdeveloped and communities that are backward have difficulties in liberating themselves from such a state of existence, partly because of their inability to perceive and quickly take advantage of new avenues and opportunities. Today, it cannot be said that the power and potential of distance education is fully appreciated even by the academics in colleges and universities in India. A discussion on certain aspects that are unique to the system and its growing relevance to a country like India is warranted.

A review of the progress of education would reveal that Distance Education is the third stage in the evolution of education, the first two stages being the Gurukul¹ system of the past and the classroom system of the present. The Academy of Plato and the Lyceum of Aristotle are but the Greek versions of the ancient Gurukul system of India. It is good in itself, but inadequate to meet the educated manpower needs of an industrial society. Classical dance and music can be taught in their entirety by one teacher; even Ayurvedic medicine² can be taught by one able practitioner. These are areas of knowledge and practice transmitted from one generation to the other with no appreciable change or addition. But Allopathic medicine or Engineering and Technology cannot be taught by an individual even if he be the most gifted among doctors or engineers. Therefore came the need for the classroom system which did not replace the earlier one, but absorbed it and incorporated additional dimensions. Even today, the tutorials and the work of an

M.Phil. or a Ph.D. candidate on his thesis under a supervisor has many characteristics of the Gurukul system.

The emergence of science and technology as a dominant force, not only in economic development, but in human affairs in general and the dawn of the 'knowledge era' as many choose to call the present period, have brought education onto centre stage as never before in human history. The classroom system has become inadequate to meet the challenges. Such terms as **universal education**, **continuing education** and **equity in educational opportunities** are concepts and demands that were not as pervasively heard or as forcefully pressed even in the recent past, as they are today. In the agricultural economy, education was an ornament and an embellishment, it was not an economic necessity. It became a tool for development in the industrial economy; and now, knowledge is a resource by itself. Its increasing social and economic value has made it a prerequisite for each and every type of attainment, irrespective of its levels. The numbers involved are large, the cost implications are high and the composition of the target group is many orders of magnitude different from the thin layer of the social stratum from which the past generation of students came. A new system to meet some or all of the new demands is called for, especially in the developing countries where accumulated arrears have to be cleared; gaps developed over centuries have to be reduced if not closed completely.

Every major breakthrough involves a discontinuity in development; it does not mean just a steeper slope in a continuous curve, but a break and a jump and then further rise as a continuum. Distance education implies a 'step' rise in the education continuum.

Looked at this way, the characteristics of distance education can be summarised as follows :

- It marks the third stage in the evolution of education, as discussed above.
- It symbolises the transformation of education from the stage of craft to that of technology, endowing it with
 - i) high productivity
 - ii) increased flexibility and
 - iii) ability to respond more readily to market demands.
- It meets the new demands that such modern developments as 'universal education', 'continuing education' and 'equity in educational opportunities' make on the education system.

The industrial civilisation was ushered in by the end of the 18th century; since then there has been an increasing use of science and technology to improve productivity in every field and craft was gradually replaced by technology. Strangely, education remained a craft: the content in education improved, but the conduct of classroom instruction continued to be the same. The teacher is still writing and laboriously drawing on the blackboard what is already available in the book. There has been no sig-

nificant increase in productivity. There has always been a linear expansion in input to increase output when needed. Distance education makes use of technology, has higher productivity and, therefore, it is comparatively cost effective, which is a factor of great significance and promise for the developing countries. It has endowed education with almost unlimited flexibility in glaring contrast to the rigidities inherent in the conventional system, and has also removed its 'temporal' and 'spatial' limitations.

Education has remained a full time occupation and has been identified with a specific stage of an individual's life from the age of 6 to around 22. Lifelong education was an ideal not realisable for most of the people. As we stand towards the end of the 20th century, we find that it is easier to transport knowledge to people rather than transport people to the place of knowledge. This reversal, though apparently simple has as great a potential as human imagination and ingenuity can see in it.

These two virtues, namely 'productivity' and 'flexibility' have made it possible today to meet the widespread demand for '**equity**' in education. As mentioned earlier, education was not an economic necessity in the not too distant past. It became, in the industrial economy, a **tool for development** and now in the 'knowledge era' a '**resource**' by itself. Education helps upward mobility and therefore all would like to have the advantage. There is clamour for a share in the limited facilities available at the higher levels of education. Grievances of inability to avail oneself of the facilities created for primary and secondary education due to social, economic and geographical reasons find widespread expression. Where the seats are limited, the Government have resorted to 'reservation' on certain established criteria. Reservation redistributes what is available; but it does not create new opportunities. Secondly, '**availability**' does not ensure '**accessibility**'. Also political solutions to social problems have the characteristic of pleasing many and frustrating some. There are situations in which 'some' are as important as 'many', and the field of education provides one such situation. Distance education solves many of these problems and opens gates to new vistas. Its potential is immense and, as stated earlier, its manifestation will depend on our own ingenuity and imagination.

A few examples in the Indian context would suffice to illustrate the fact that distance education is no competitor to conventional education. It has its own clientele and own objectives and, by and large, meets those demands that the conventional system fails to or is inadequate to meet.

India has around 176 higher education institutions, 6949 colleges and over 4.25 million students (1989-90)³. Yet, only 6% of the relevant age group is in the colleges and universities. This is low even from the viewpoint of a developing country. The figures for some of the developing countries are as follows⁴:

i) Egypt	20%
ii) Thailand	20%
iii) Turkey	10%

iv) Brazil	11%
v) Mexico	16%

Among the 94%, outside the higher education system, there are boys and girls who are academically endowed and motivated. A student admitted for the 1992 session in the B.Sc. Programme of IGNOU from one of the Southern States has a score of 89% in optionals. The clientele for distance education comes from the 94% of the relevant age group among whom many remain outside the campus of the conventional system for reasons other than academic.

According to the Selected Educational Statistics (1988-89), Government of India⁵, we have 260,000 teachers in primary education and 115,000 in secondary and higher-secondary education who are already teaching in the classrooms, but are untrained. The existing less than 1500 training institutions cannot accommodate them, nor can they become full-time students.

India has committed, under Section 45 of the Directive Principles in the Constitution⁶ to provide within ten years free and compulsory education for boys and girls upto the age of 14. Even in 1992, this goal is still far off. According to the Report⁷ of the Committee headed by Acharya Ramamurthy (1990), 41.9% of the boys and 61.5% of the girls in the age group 6-14 do not attend schools⁸. If the constitutional requirement is to be fulfilled even by 2000 A.D., the number of trained teachers required will be enormous. Obviously, it cannot be met through the conventional system.

According to a study of IAMR⁹, the total strength of nursing personnel in the allopathic system in 1986 was 148,000 excluding Auxiliary Nursing Midwives while the strength of qualified doctors was 270,000. In India we have a strange situation of about two doctors per nurse while in advanced countries there are around five nurses per doctor. As early as 1961, the Mudaliar Committee¹⁰ recommended at least 3 nurses per doctor; even that would need a phenomenal additional strength. We do not produce more than about 8500 nurses a year and this number could hardly contribute to bring about any change in the ratio since we are producing around 16,000 medical degree holders a year. One has to turn to distance education necessarily.

The steep rate of growth of knowledge, bordering on explosion, and the increasing obsolescence rate make it necessary for all and especially those in the field of science and technology to take systematic steps to update, upgrade and broaden their knowledge. The half-life of knowledge in Science and Technology is around 3 to 3.5 years. Under these circumstances, personnel in the field of science and technology must have opportunities for attending appropriately designed refresher courses at least once in 5 years. The projected strength of science and technology personnel in India (1990) was about 3.5 million¹¹. It means around 700,000 persons per year must be retrained or have opportunities for continuing education. The formal system again cannot handle this number.

Numerous such cases can be cited to establish the relevance and inevitability of distance education institutions for India and to identify the target groups they must handle.

Open University System in India is in its very early stages of development. It is yet to touch even the very fringe of the kind of tasks mentioned above. In the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India are listed 15 national languages. The *Sahitya Akademi*¹² makes annual awards in 22 languages including English. If education is to reach people cutting across the strata, whether it be economic or social, it must be available in the language of the people. Realising this, the Central Advisory Board of Education, the highest policy making body in India, has recommended the establishment of an Open University in each State¹³. The coordination of these universities and developing the necessary mechanism for determination of standards in distance education are tasks that are somewhat unique to this country.

India has forty odd universities that offer correspondence courses. Conversion of these into full-fledged multimedia distance education institutions or their gradual discontinuance is another issue that needs attention.

A well defined policy for funding distance education system does not exist. The assistance may even differ from one programme to the other; still a broad framework is necessary.

Over the years, the functions of the formal universities have been fairly well defined. They are :

- i) preservation of knowledge
- ii) creation of new knowledge
- iii) communication of knowledge
- iv) extension activities

The functions of open universities have not been defined yet with such precision and universal acceptance. The system is still evolving. Its functions may have both universal and local components. The question arises whether open universities will have the same four functions as the conventional ones. If the answer is 'yes', what would be the change in emphasis; if the answer is 'no', what are the new or additional functions! The answers may even differ from region to region and country to country. As for India, the distance education specialists have a number of issues to address themselves to, in order to be able to guide the development of this system which has all the promise of rapid growth in the coming years.

The *Indian Journal of Open Learning*, being launched by IGNOU, could provide a forum for discussion and debate on the experiences and experiments in India and abroad which, among other things, would help the development of a distance education system that is indigenous in character, but incorporates all the relevant factors that other countries may contribute, be they based on their studies, successes or failures.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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