

Open Learning and Distance Education in India – An Introspection

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Abstract : *This paper was presented as Prof G. Ram Reddy Memorial Endowment Lecture, 1998 organised by the Indian Distance Education Association on 18-19 April, 1998. The author discusses the growth of open learning and distance education in India. An analysis of the relevance of courses and the extent of reach of open learning system is presented. The author further deliberates upon the extent of sensitivity of the open learning system to the social needs of the country, and notes that proper selection and utilisation of communication technology will strengthen the open learning system.*

Introduction

I consider this opportunity given to me by the organisers of IDEA Conference as an honor and privilege. I am indebted to Late Prof. G. Ram Reddy who introduced me to the mainstream of open and distance education in this country. This is my small tribute to a great educationalist who initiated and led one of the most significant developments in Indian education of the present century. Prof. Reddy was a visionary, a down to earth pragmatic and a great human being integrated in one personality — a rare combination which can make significant difference in a nations destiny. And, he did make a difference. The origin and rise of open learning in this country has been undoubtedly due to this great personality. I had the good luck and rare opportunity to work with him in very close contact during the shaping of the Indira Gandhi National Open University. Prof. Reddy could keep in touch with latest developments in telecommunication and information technologies relevant to distance education without losing the ground realities of Indian society. This is well reflected in the objectives, structure and development of two major Open Universities in India which Prof. Reddy founded. Today we talk a lot about distance education and open learning — emerging responsibilities, new courses, innovative systems and modern technologies. I think it is time to introspect. Let us examine the successes and failures, gains and setbacks of Indian open learning and distance education system. We have more than 35 years of experience in correspondence education and more than 25 years have passed since the idea of Open University at national level was discussed and accepted. The open schooling system has been in existence for almost twenty years and the open university system for more than 15

years. India has a reasonably long and fairly active history and background in this field. The national institutions in open learning have been in existence at university and school levels for more than 12 years and 8 years, respectively. The national commitment to the use of open learning and distance education systems to cater to the educational needs in all sectors of education is well reflected in our national policies and plans in the last couple of decades.

The *National policy on Education, 1986* highlighted the role of open learning and distance education for the democratisation of education in the country. The NPE states that the 'future thrust shall be in the direction of distance and open learning systems'. The Eighth Five Year Plan document states that a well developed Open Learning System will be developed, relevant to the needs and circumstances of learners, especially girls and women. The major thrust of OLS will be on the acquisition of life skills and vocational skills, directly contributing to productivity and inculcation of habits of self-learning. The Ninth Five Year Plan (1997-2002) also gives great emphasis on open learning at both secondary and tertiary levels including catering to professional and vocational needs. It is absolutely necessary to see to what extent the open learning and distance education institutions have responded to the expectations of the country. I would like to take three broad areas for discussion here.

- One, the relevance of courses and programmes and the extent of their reach to the varied clientele who need education and training.
- Two, the extent to which the open learning and distance education system in India has responded to the educational needs in different sectors and levels.
- Three, the extent of an effectiveness in the use of telecommunication and information technologies by OLS in India.

Relevance of Courses and Extent of Reach

The correspondence education system in this country was initiated mainly to cater to the higher education needs of larger number of clientele who could not take advantage of the formal system due to different reasons. The very same courses offered in the formal system were made available through correspondence mode. In fact initially correspondence courses were seen as an extension of registration of students as private candidates in universities. It was believed that incorporating the methodologies and materials associated with correspondence education will systematize the study of privately registered students. It is true that correspondence education programmes in India have opened up the gates of formal education to a large number of people. More than fifty universities are offering correspondence education in the country making it one of the largest dual mode systems in the world.

In the early seventies when the nation deliberated on the establishment of a national open university one of the major concerns highlighted was extending higher education to a variety of learners belonging to different sections of the community. This is highlighted in the Working Group Report on Open University (1974) which states that 'when the Open University is fully developed, any student even in the remotest corner of the country can have access to its instruction and degrees'. One can see the reflection of

this concern in the Project Report and Act of the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU). The main mission of IGNOU as envisaged in its Act is to democratise higher education. It talks about better access, improved quality and increased relevance of higher education. A shift in perspective is very evident. The main objective of correspondence education has been to provide higher education to larger number of people thereby reduce the load on the formal system using mainly the printed lessons. Open learning system in India got originated with an aim to increase access of all sections of the community especially those with different types of disadvantages, to courses relevant to life and occupations. It has been attempting to improve quality of education through the use of multimedia instructional strategies.

Let us examine to what extent the mission and objectives of the open learning institutions are being seriously pursued. One may look at the performance of two national level institutions set up at university and school levels — the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) and National Open School (NOS). Both are fairly young institutions and hence, it may not be fair to make value judgements about their performance during their short existence. However, it is necessary to review their functioning so that suitable corrections could be made at the appropriate time. Such corrections and reorientation can avoid the growing institutions to fall into wrong directions and rigid moulds. It is expected that the openness being preached and implemented by the open learning institutions is also well reflected in their own structure and functioning. There is a danger that innovative methodologies and modes of functioning do get formalised over a period of time creating rigid conventions and traditions. Hence, it is absolutely necessary for these institutions to have inherent openness and sensitivity to respond to emerging issues and problems related to education in the society from time to time.

The Indira Gandhi National Open University was established in 1985 with laudable objectives and wide scope. Its objectives are so varied and comprehensive that they range from education and training in various arts, crafts and skills of the country raising their quality and improving their availability to the people to providing degree, diploma and certificate courses at undergraduate and post-graduate levels including research. It was also envisaged that a wide range of target groups will be catered to by the university including groups living in remote and rural areas as well as working people, housewives and other adults who wish to upgrade or acquire knowledge through studies in various fields.

The comprehensiveness and wide range of courses and target groups envisaged in the IGNOU Act made it necessary to define its priorities before initiating its academic programmes and deciding the target groups. IGNOU conducted a need survey to decide its initial course areas. Accordingly it started a Post-graduate Programme in Management and an Under-graduate Degree Programme. It also decided to go for a Post-graduate Programme in Distance Education mainly to take care of the human resource development in this area. The programmes and courses being offered by IGNOU do find a healthy mix of conventional and non-conventional courses at post-graduate and undergraduate levels including undergraduate certificates and diplomas normally not offered at University level. It has surely been a “University with a difference”. However, IGNOU is slowly developing into an urban oriented elitist institution contrary to

the vision of Prof. Reddy who wanted universities to be 'The Ivory Towers Thrown Open'. Instead we seem to be creating ivory towers of a different kind. Most of IGNOU students are from urban areas, rural and weaker sections of the society and also those from the remote areas are only marginally catered to. IGNOU's 'successful and popular' programmes are almost entirely urban with main emphasis on income generation. The initial emphasis on reaching out to remote areas has been of lesser concern. The 'remote area cell' which was created in the university to formulate alternate ways of reaching out to the students from geographically remote areas, tribal populations and those from hills and the islands has ceased to exist. The emphasis on basing planning and development of the university on learner needs, societal priorities and analysis of student profile got changed to considerations such as cost-effectiveness and market demand. IGNOU has changed its orientation and direction considerably. Probably, in order to come out of its elitist nature it did initiate some activities and programmes for the rural and weaker sections of the community keeping in view the societal priorities in education. The creation of a Centre for Extension Education in IGNOU was one such effort. This has created a dichotomy in the perspective and offering of IGNOU. On one hand there are the mainstream courses and on the other extension efforts — very similar to the formal universities which has the mainstream activities of research and teaching (in the faculties) and the extension activities of the Centres of Continuing Education which mostly remain marginal. The efforts initiated sometime after this memorial lecture for reaching to the disadvantaged will go a long way in changing the nature and focus of the university.

Let us now examine the performance of the national level organisation of open learning at the school level. The National Open School (NOS) which was established in 1989 originated from the then existing Open School Project under the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE). The main objective of the Open School Project has been to provide secondary and senior secondary education mainly to the dropouts. The mission and objectives got further comprehensive and broad when the National Open School was established in 1989 as an autonomous institution under the Ministry of Human Resource Development. The mission of the National Open School Society is to provide 'continuing and developmental education at the school stage to prioritized clientele groups to make its share of contribution to universalisation of education, to greater equality and justice in society and to the evolution of a Learning Society'. The newly established NOS continued with the secondary and senior secondary courses of the Open School Project which were more or less similar to the CBSE curriculum. Responding to the mandate given to the NOS, efforts were soon initiated to bring in more flexibilities to the choice of subjects, curriculum organisation and delivery mechanisms. Secondary and senior secondary curricula very suitably modified and vocational courses were introduced which can be combined with the academic courses. NOS soon realised that it should cater to the educational needs in all sectors of school education. The initiation of the Open Basic Education for the neo-literates has been a significant change in the development of the NOS.

A review of the courses offerings and student profile of NOS will reveal that :

- it is reaching all corners of the country including very remote areas through its almost 800 study centres

- the enrolment has been increasing steadily with an annual growth rate of about 20% in the last two years
- it remains to be predominantly urban with Delhi accounting for about one-third of the enrolment
- the enrolment of women and girls (about 32%), after socially weaker sections, disabled and those from geographically weaker sections of the community are to be considerable improved.

The NOS has initiated a few new schemes to improve its reach to all disadvantaged groups and make its course offerings more relevant and flexible. The new initiatives include :

- setting up of the Special Accredited Institutions for Education of the Disadvantaged (SAIED)
- strengthening the vocational education area with a scheme to increase the number of courses
- setting up of the National Consortium for Open Schooling (NCOS) with an aim to spread open schooling in all states by encouraging the states to set up state open schools or to improve the access and quality of the existing ones
- allowing transfer of credits from CBSE TO THE NOS
- initiating deliberations and experiments to develop suitable instructional systems and delivery models for Open Elementary Education of children in the age group of 6-14.

Institutions like IGNOU and NOS and for that matter all state open universities and state open schools as well as the correspondence institutions may have to have very well deliberated policies which would decide the future directions and orientation of these institutions. Should these institutions be more concerned with social obligations and responsibilities enshrined in their constitution or Act or should they focus more on income-generating efforts? These two approaches are not entirely contradicting. An institution can evolve a healthy balance between the two.

Extent of Sensitivity to Societal Priorities

It is true that India has one of the largest open learning and distance education systems at tertiary education level in the world including one of the world's ten mega universities. It has also made some mark at the secondary education level with the development of the open schooling system led by the largest open school in the world. India has a history of more than 35 years of correspondence and distance education. However, it has done pretty little in the priority areas of education viz, adult literacy and continuing education of neo-literates and the universalisation of primary education. There are some efforts made in areas such as in service training of primary school teachers, training of panchayat raj functionaries and continuing education of neo-literates. The DEP-DPEP Project of IGNOU and the Open Basic Education programme of NOS are examples worth mentioning. However, these efforts are very recent and are to be watched to see

their success. India has not applied the open learning approach and distance education modalities for catering to the educational needs of elementary education for the age group of 6 to 14. Models are available elsewhere in the western world such as New Zealand and Canada and also in the developing world such as Zimbabwe. These models may not be as such applicable in the Indian context. We seem to take a stand that open schooling is not viable for below 14 age group. We are probably making two mistakes.

One, although we do differentiate open learning and distance education at the conceptual level, we consider them integrated at the operational level. It is not essential that open schooling should necessarily mean that one should teach at a distance. It really talks about flexibilities and openness in many aspects.

Two, conceptually we know that distance education doesn't mean that distance learning methods alone can be employed, rather the concept of distance education is much more comprehensive as Keegan (1986) defines it as 'the quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the length of the learning process'. Newer teaching-learning models and delivery mechanisms may have to be evolved for younger children. The open learning and distance education institutions have been fairly rigid in the nature of instructional systems and styles and formats of self-learning materials. Today, one finds that more or less similar styles and formats of learning materials are being used by the open universities and open schools for teaching learners of varied maturity and at different levels. There is a need to have alternatives in the media mix, learning materials, delivery mechanisms and evaluation strategies. The open learning institutions should become more and more open and flexible in its own functioning.

Utilization of Technologies

Distance education and open learning systems all over the world including India do utilize educational telecommunication and information technologies for making their instructional, delivery, evaluation and management sub-systems more effective and efficient. Use of information technologies for better monitoring and management of student records has made the large student enrolment in open universities and open schools possible. The use of technologies of education evolved from principles of behavioural sciences such as programmed instruction, group techniques and communication theories have helped in making the self-learning materials and contact and counselling sessions more effective. Distance education institutions in India have also been using broadcast and audio-video cassettes for strengthening its learning systems. Lately modern technologies such as teleconferencing and internet are used for training and teaching purposes. Since 1993 IGNOU has been utilizing the satellite technology in organising one-way video and two-way audio conferences for training the study centre coordinators and academic counsellors and also for direct tutoring and counselling of students. The NOS also has been utilizing this technology for training of personnel in the accredited institutions. IGNOU has also started online (through internet) registration and offer selected courses. It is also in the process of setting up a large communi-

cation network all over the country for facilitating its course development and delivery. NOS has initiated work to launch an Indian Open Schooling Network initially using its existing website (www.nos.org) and later its own server.

Availability and access to technologies will increase considerably in the coming years. Under these conditions the open learning and distance education institutions are expected to work towards the effective use of these technologies. Keeping in view the needs of the academic courses and the target groups, considerable efforts have to be made in instructional designing and software development. Institutions seem to think that they have enough experience in this area. This is unfortunately not true. We have very little understanding regarding instructional designing for new technologies such as tele-conferencing and on line offer of courses especially in the Indian context. Even in the case of educational broadcast and audio-video materials in education there is an urgent need to evolve innovative formats and styles. Instead of focusing on these efforts open learning institutions have been making efforts in only developing technology infrastructure. This is of course important. Equal efforts in conducting research and development studies related to instructional designing and software development are not made by institutions such as IGNOU and NOS. Some efforts were made when IGNOU conducted its first tele-conferencing in 1993 for the Extended Contact Programme of Post-graduate programme in Higher Education. The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) has conducted a few experiments in systematic instructional designing and appropriate material development for training teachers using interactive television. Much more efforts are to be made in this area.

Technologies on their own may not make a difference in the learning effectiveness. They are like trucks carrying grocery. It is the grocery which will make some difference in the nutrition of people, not the trucks. Similarly, it is the treatment of the message and designing of materials which will make a difference in learning not technology per se. What makes certain technologies useful and important is that these technologies have the potential and provide possibilities for creating certain levels of communication and interaction.

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