

Open and Distance Learning: Crisis and Meaning

PANDAV NAYAK

Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi, India

Abstract: *Open and Distance Learning (ODL) though of recent origin, has come to a cross-roads largely because of its main article of faith and performance which consists in centrality of info-tech for solutions of ills of education. The paper argues that where excess of dependence on info-tech may reduce it to a mechanical carrier of neo-liberal market ideology, the same can as well be judiciously used to meet the dire needs of the marginalized people in developing countries like India. Awareness oriented, empowerment - directed, social-criticism based education can be promoted with unrivalled competence but it should not be carried out separately as independent modules, rather it should underpin the entire edifice of learning and teaching permeating this unique system. ODL can be a help for the needy and the disprivileged by extending benefits of info-tech for social development directly and, as an advocate for change in the perspective and horizon of national thinking indirectly. It can enormously contribute to preparation of producers, citizens and persons through innovative educational interventions as well, the paper contends.*

Introduction

Most social studies of recent origin engage intentionally or otherwise in debating about cultural forms. A clear responsibility is recognized in such endeavors: how to contribute to the growth in the reflexive consciousness of the contemporary discourses. If a self-evaluation is permitted, the report card on their performances will show a wide range of variations, but to have them framed within an integrated process of ratiocination is a credit which belongs to few like Giddens. Giddens' theory of structuration, it may be submitted assertively, goes a long way in reconciling structures (organized and corporatized) with the 'creativity' of masses of people (variegated, differentiated and forward-moving). Resultant knowledge generated represents essentially a process which is structuring itself into many forms through the strategic use of axial planks of appropriation, negotiation, exchange and analysis within a general environment in which the corporate power rubs itself against the creativity of the masses. Terms of bargain for the competing claimants can be set either way: people can manage water if the State fails to provide it or they can trigger a grass roots revolution where the State may be earning American dollars mostly through body-shopping of the software engineers, or an Aruna Roy (with an IAS background behind her) making it abundantly clear that the so-called illiterate and backward people can perform feats of governance which the bureaucrats have much to learn from. This side of the story is now being clearly told by a resurgent civil society which has boldly underlined the role of plurality in the "daily renewal of the logics" of co-existence. The other side of the story i.e., from the State, is much well-known though less aired; it has lost most of its fangs acquired during the 19th century and continued till 1960s. Writing the report card on performatory role of knowledge, Lyotard (a pioneer among the post-modernists) has made a blunt observation:

"the State and/or company must abandon the idealist and humanist narratives of legitimization in order to justify the new goals -- in the discourse of today's financial backers of research, the only credible goal is power. Scientists, technicians and instruments are purchased not to find truth, but to augment power". (Lyotard, 1984).

This age has been described as post-modernist/post-industrial/information age in which, in the words of Bell (1973), knowledge and information technology are fast replacing industrial commodity production as the "axial principles" of social organization.

With these two ends clear and following Giddens' methodological imperatives (appropriation, negotiation and exchange), one in a knowledge enterprise must learn to ask: what sort of responsibility have I been called upon to perform within the perimeters of the assigned role? Otherwise, the teleology of the State-funded projects will press us all down humiliatingly before the ordinary but creative masses who have, in some sectors, successfully shown the art of living without much of State protection/provision.

Challenges for ODL

The challenge for Open and Distance learning (ODL) clearly lies beyond its methodological hubris. 1960s particularly witnessed an inverse relationship between economic development of people on the one hand, and growth of modernization models in the bounded disciplines of Social Sciences on the other. But before long, the moment of truth was encountered, the models of development failed along with behavioral theories / models of modernization. Counter-responses were formulated soon enough and a besieged education discipline/field finds itself confronted with a daunting series of onslaughts principally launched by a shifting trend in the American (now called post-industrial) society. Machlup (1962) has documented, that by 1962, almost half the American workforce was engaged in information production and distribution. This figure had risen to 75% by 1990s. There was thus a paradigm shift in the world of social living already taking place in the lives of Americans, to which Bell (1973) was referring. But the case with most countries, particularly of the South, has been industrial production-driven economy. Current debates in India about *new* vs. *old* economy points at a related trend which is not difficult to see. IT remains much more to be integrated into the system than has been the case so far. Therefore, mindless switch-over to info-tech without an appropriate examination of its integrative potentials for social development purposes may prove disastrous. It is in this context that the swan-song of technology driven ODL needs to be constructively critiqued. The latest slogan of *reaching the unreached* therefore sounds rhetorical especially in the absence of a systemic planning (much less dedication) of transition from the initial stage of its technological dependence to the current one of potential social applications. Our fear is that ODL has made an unexamined entry into this info-tech world and has been not in a position to dictate terms to this baggage of methodologies which have come with knowledge and PC revolution and which have strongly influenced direction of its growth. The great majority of PC users use their PCs for word processing or at the most for e-mail. This is something which a computer of ten years ago would have easily performed. But thanks to an aggressive advertisement driven profit making strategy, computers are ever getting loaded with features which most people never use. Paul Strassman has also concluded after his industry - wide analysis of IT investments that *there is no relationship whatsoever between computer expenditure and company performance*. Another concluding observation says: *Technology for the few, social*

alienation and oppression of the desk-bound working people are the dark sides of the PC revolution which has also come to the help of struggling millions as with people involved in the Chiapas revolt in Mexico or in China, Russia etc. (Baran, 1995).

Borrowing from a UNESCO study, emergence of an information society poses challenges to both democracy and learning at a deeper level. The biggest challenge is really not opening up access to new technology, important, though it is. It actually involves preparing new perspectives, skills, knowledge, strategies and structure - principally an educational endeavour which however cannot be allowed to work under the influence of market forces. This is particularly the case when trying to address issues of cultural diversity and creativity, educational opportunities, public participation, social awareness and responsibility, and promotion of tolerance, peace and citizenship values.

Globalised Communication Revolution and its Implications

The reality with this momentous change which has overtaken the knowledge universe however is what the market forces have made of it. ODL apparently is a helpless victim in this top-down organizational strategy of governance mostly found in the developing countries. What actually highlighted the role of IT in the educational system was the United States Vice President, Albert Gore's 1993 call for creation of 'information super highway'. Subsequently, Gore gave a call for creation of a National Information Infrastructure and a Global Information Infrastructure based on five principles of (i) maximum possible reliance on private investment (ii) promoting and protecting competition, (iii) ensuring open networks and universal access, (iv) avoiding information haves and have nots and (v) maintaining flexible and adaptable rules and regulations (Kolhatkar, 2000). This line of thinking and emphasizing was clearly reflected in the 1998/9 *World Development Report (WDR)* dedicated to *Knowledge for Development*. Among its many precepts, the WDR exhorts the developing countries *not to re-invent the wheel (and) acquire technology from abroad and try to be players in the global markets and go for such institutions which set standards and facilitate the flow of information essential for effective markets* (pp 1-2). And the warning was clear: *Basic education.... should not monopolize a nation's attention (if it is to) become a player in global markets (p.42) (UNESCO, 2000)*. Higher education has been preferred since it offers the skills and training needed to produce people who can monitor technological trends and help develop appropriate technological strategy.

What Al Gore and the WDR have suggested/recommended, are all there to be seen in the fast emerging global trends as given below:

- (i) The sectoral composition of the top 100 Transnational Corporations (TNCs) who are the driving engines of globalization and development today does not show any radical change in terms of their assets and sales during the last quarter of the century. Except, of course, for one massive change on the part of a new entrant accounting for 20% of the total. And this new entrant is the ELECTRONICS SECTOR (Sutcliffe, and Glyn, 1999).
- (ii) Whereas in 1970s, most of the world's telecom systems were non-profit and state-owned monopolies, privatization of telecom (is perhaps what can be described as the largest liquidation of public property) has generated over \$105 billion since 1984 (Conner, 1995). In other words, communication is now at the heart of global capitalism.

Two trends mark the global communication revolution. *First* there has been a *rapid corporate concentration within media industries*, along with a strong drive towards globalization. There are five vertically integrated media corporations but eventually, a mature global media market should be dominated by a few with one or two dozen firms filling regional or niche markets. Large scale increase in global advertising resulting out of TNC firms' expanding market plans is going to make this media growth largely commercial. According to an estimate, this figure will increase from a 1995 total of \$335 billions to \$2 trillions in 2020 (Conner, 1995). Transnational media firms work closely with global capitalism since they are major marketeers in devising programming. *Second* trend is the *development of digital communication (DC)* and related technology breakthroughs such as wireless mobile communication which makes it less expensive and more accessible. DC provides the basis for eventual convergence of the *media, telecommunication* (telephony primarily) and *computer* industries. This has two consequences: (a) the resultant sector becomes the largest and fastest growing component of the global economy. Based on market capitalization, three out of four largest firms and thirteen out of fifty largest firms in the world fall in this sector. (b) the second consequence relates to a new air of uncertainty about the future of the traditional media and telephone industries if an internet comes to dominate the future scene. Thanks to the clout of these monopolies, Internet is shifting "from being a *participatory medium* that serves the interests of the public to being a *broadcast medium* where corporations deliver consumer-oriented information. Interactivity would thus be reduced to a little more than sales transaction and e-mail".

This much of a longish discussion on the uses of communication technologies on which ODL is becoming increasingly dependent is necessary to seek the meaning and purpose of a learning sector. We are face-to-face with an irresistible monster viz., globalization with its rampant marketization driven by America's informationalized economy. Info-tech dominance is not only material, it is cultural as well, Rust (1991) counsels an important caution:

"We need to examine the extent to which the new technology is liberating and the extent to which it is related to exploitative commercial interests. We must explore how education can break the bonds of the totalizing genius of capitalism whose major interest is to expand markets, capture the minds of potential consumers and invade the educational enterprise in the interests of economic advantage".

Mindless buying of computers without a plan to institutionalize and integrate them for a liberating educational mission, amounts to serving the cause of "exploitative commercial interests". Addressing such educational concerns which are on demand without appropriately balancing these considerations with those which the society needs for formation of 'producers', 'citizens' and 'persons' amounts to succumbing to the pressures of a 'totalizing genius of capitalism'. If such practices dominate an ODL organization, especially in a developing country like India, the virtues of liberation will be pushed behind the prospects of profit, social mission will be sub-ordinated to a technological one always on the look-out for the exotic and above all, the overwhelming void created by long-delayed reforms will devour them all causing monumental wastage of resources which could otherwise have been used for social development. Let us not forget that education in

this country is considered a 'non-merit subsidy' -- comparable to subsidies given to kerosene, LPG, food grains, etc. The share of spending on higher education has declined from 0.71 percent in the First Five Year Plan to 0.35 in the plan. About 6 percent of people in the age group of 17-35 get education in India as compared to 50 percent in the USA, for example. This low incidence had provoked the National Policy on Education (1986) and the Programme of Action of 1992 to focus on the importance of Distance Education to address particularly these concerns of ever-increasing load of unmet higher education demands.

Empowering Potential of ODL

Along with this mandate, ODL can search for its meaning along the corridors of awareness-oriented and empowerment-directed education. It has now been well-established by the Human Development Report, 2000 that nothing can even be close to education in relieving Indian women from pernicious and rampant repercussions of domestic violence. Similarly, an end to child labour has been clearly seen in the universalization of elementary education along with some support facilities. As they say, 'schooling is skilling' and education is a rich and complex source of developmental inputs to fight poverty and problems of over-population. That education vastly facilitates overall development is now a truism beyond what the human capital theory had to offer till the other day. And ODL has to pinch a role for itself for all the empowering potentials it can command in its repertoire.

ODL's empowering potentials are not what the conventional system does not do and hence, it is supplementary or complementary to it. ODL has its own meaning and persona largely emanating from a list of missions which it can only perform -- the positive ground of self-validation. Flexibility, learner - centeredness, open alliance strategies to improve utility of education in terms of its spread effects and response quality may take ODL to unimagined heights. Less engagement with national social missions can make it complacent and force it in a direction of gloss, easy money and sporadic fame.

All its knowledge appropriation strategies should be *definitionally* informed, lest the servant becomes the master and what was inaugurated as a 'liberating force' may turn out, in its new-fangled info-tech obsession, to be an effective carrier of neo-liberal conservatism. The word 'definitionally' is important; these social missions are not to be dealt with separately through designing and developing modules; actually they should underpin all education offered in a society like ours which has been historically structured in a particular format and which has been responding to outside forces in a particular way. This will demarcate a *pro-active learning environment* for which some bit of conceptual understanding is always necessary for the learner to choose between competing perspectives. As Paulo Friere famously commented, true education lies in cultural emancipation and it is definitely not what it has been made into: a sick narration of repetitive details.

There is so much value to 'critical consciousness', for learning should be conducted through dialogues, debates and discussions in which the learner's own common-sense plays no less a role than the incoming influences of new ideas. That is how both the material and cultural context of learning can be ensured in a process where the learner becomes empowered to combat indigenous and exogenous influences in the spirit of a critique. Again, all these are not meant to be a part of a learning package; such a spirit should inform the knowledge - base itself on which ODL can grow rich and blossom meaningfully. Mere

fine-tuning of pedagogical methods may mean more of the same and in the process of counting of trees, the woods will be passed by.

ODL must learn to address the central paradox of Indian education and this can be explained (at least symbolically) with the help of a common visual experience: unfinished buildings, loose wires hanging out, mounds of debris in public spaces, etc. how they co-exist with hordes of computer geniuses that the country feels proud of? A critical cause is the skewed development in education which has become unrelated to the society in many ways: in the example above, what we lack is skilled labour and a plan for their employability. India is known to be living in its villages and the scenario of infrastructure of social development in the village is quite depressing. What Grameen (Village) phones did in Bangladesh can be tried on a wider scale in India and for all social educational missions: women empowerment, tele-medicine for rural folks, school education, disaster preparedness, rural planning and participation. ODL has tremendous potential to be both a source for and an agent of sensitizing developmental channels for integrative social development. Let us talk straight: it will be pointless to try to become a corporate university; last month some 2000 of them congregated in New York under the auspices of Corporate Universities exchange. It is wasteful to remain indecisive about a course of action, as if 'virtuality' is the sole, defining, parameter of an ODL system. It will be an enterprising role and a pioneering one at that, if ODL gets down to the business of social development including education for all. In respect of its education mandate, the following two points need to be borne in mind:

- (i) as the 1992 World Bank Report pointed out, nearly 61 per cent of the cumulative public resources through government financed education are utilized by the privileged group of Indians; and
- (ii) the barrier between higher and other sectors of education should be lowered so that an unhindered role play becomes possible for effective combating. More than that, a sensitive perspective/mind-set which takes into account social engineering related education agenda, needs to be fostered.

It is in this context that we take for discussion some issues relating to the preparation of persons, citizens and producers which an education system ideally should engage itself in a bid to create a civil society. As the Task Force Report on Higher Education in Developing Countries (jointly prepared in 2000 by the World Bank and the UNESCO, though differing significantly from the recommendations of the WDR referred to above) has succinctly observed:

"The best higher education institution is a model and a source of pressure for creating a modern civil society" (Rust, 1991). While the Report recommends for a participative, open and plural culture to be nurtured and promoted, a specific one goes beyond the obvious: having acknowledged the importance of liberal or general education, it asks for its encouragement as a necessary complement to the scientific and technical education. The Report is closer to a progressive version of ODL in its emphasis on cognitive skills based on social criticism and breadth of knowledge which involves some familiarity with diverse aspects of science philosophy and learning itself. In a manner of speaking, the Report tries to integrate the Jacques Delors' famous four pillars of learning with the modern demands of a knowledge economy.

"An education system aiming to educate for modern life must begin", writes Ernesto Ottone, (1996) "by abandoning any limited concept of the latter, such as identifying it only with processes of instrumentality, rationality, productive efficiency of unification through consumption." Without ignoring the importance of rationalization, such a view tries to subordinate it to values associated with democracy, tolerance, freedom and diversity. As Alan Touraine has observed, "The change can be effected with acquired experience, projects and memories and is not opposed to the maintenance of cultural identity." Yes, of course, through the routes of critiques and critical consciousness, education should serve to form a plural, inter-cultural identity. This does not mean conserving what is 'pure' in popular culture but, rather, arriving through democratically conducted dialogues among different cultural processes.

Education should enable the learners to "interweave life experiences" without having to trash the past or the context of living. But, as we can recall from our own experiences, sometimes, acting under excessive rationalism and with maximal regard to norms of expository and scientific language, we fail to provide a channel to human needs, to narrate one's own life before others. Narrative language, as opposed to scientific language helps groups to create 'a moment of communicative intimacy', and over years, of group interaction, and historical memories. One who forgets the past, is condemned to relive the same. A person always seeks to review his/her past in relation to history.

The formation of a person is the formation of a memory capable of interweaving life experiences, of connecting as opposed to dissociating oneself from one's history and others'. People as persons have historical projects. Educational experiences with young people have shown their importance (Sime, 1994). Right methodologies and an enabling environment may motivate persons to broaden the horizons of human experience. It must, therefore, be recognized, first and foremost, that people have histories and coherence born not out of scientific and quantifiable objectivity which cannot be the determining force of education.

ODL, especially given its networked organized spread, can be of immense use to process documentation of such human experiences and struggles. This can be facilitated with the help of communication technologies which can be used for storage of data, voice and text.

The classical formation of citizen is one with rights. That is to say the educational goal is to produce citizens conscious of their rights and prepared to protest whenever these are violated. The classical formation of the citizen is complemented by the integration of other specific rights arising from different relations between persons and the economy, politics, culture, gender, age, environment, etc.

Flexibility, openness and amenability to suit emergent requirements of learning make ODL an ideal platform for citizenship education for rights and obligations. Missions of political literacy and education for procedural values for an effective democracy require not only mass spread but a particular educational response to address the needs of citizenship ever in making. This amounts to formation of citizenship with a historical vocation which is another way of saying that a vigilant citizenry is the best guarantee against attacks on democracy and a culture of human rights. Essentially being in the nature of an ongoing exercise, ODL can help in providing such an education which will make citizens builders of

historical projects. In any event, these are major challenges for the ODL to remain learner-focussed.

For any national mission, there are some strategic requirements and nothing could be more important in this area than *training of the workforce*. This entails diverse components relating to skills-formation, upgradation, re-skilling, etc. – and several associated features like institutionalization, process-coordination involved in the economy; the impact these developments would have on the individuals in the society on the one hand, and the role of education in formation of these procedures on the other. Three critical features of such a producer's education which ODL can rightly highlight in its learner-centred approach are:

The first feature is the emphasis on the formation of producers with consciousness. That is to say they be told about the revolutionary roles they have in changing a society. One example in this area is the Marxist view of change for which the workers and peasants are given education. A common pitfall in such an exercise lies in quantification exercises usually undertaken to measure education given. Such a reductionist exercise to be avoided, emphasizes 'expository clarity': articulate speakers are more advanced than those who cannot speak with clarity, for any number of reasons. It is important to remember the words of Jorge Osorio (1994) "Consciousness is not external, it does not come from outside the popular movements, it emerges from within the subjects' multiple daily processes." 'Paulo Friere's critical comments on the popular notion of 'extension education' are apt for an ODL system to remain sensitive to this dimension of critical consciousness. From a truly humanistic point of view, it is not for them (agronomists) to extend, entrust or dictate their technical capacities, nor is it for them to persuade by using peasants as "blank pages" for their propaganda. In their role as educators, they must refuse to domesticate people. Their task is *communication*, not *extension* (Emphasis original).

While the learner as a subject is important for experiments in generation of consciousness (as opposed to verbalized rational consciousness normally found in narrowly conceived scientific studies), the learner's environment is no less important. The *second feature* to be noted is that each producer wherever she/he is, is a producer with culture. Long years of educational experiences and participatory research have led to greater sensitivity to what is known as 'popular culture' --- something so important for the learner and so much ignored by the so-called teachers. And the *third feature* to be noted is that educational processes need always to be evaluated as to how effective they are in advancing worker's abilities and aptitudes. Education cannot, of course remain concerned with skill development alone. But a periodic review of the educational processes will certainly help in placing these three contributions in respect of formation of person, citizen and producer in correct perspective.

Conclusion

The empowering potential of the ODL is rooted in its own meaning and structure based on flexibility, learner-centeredness open ended strategies for utility and quality of education. However, there are a number of challenges that ODL faces in its present form-ensuring the cultural context of the learner to develop critical consciousness, to be a source for and an agent of integrative social development and preparing persons, citizens and producers for civil society. In this context, ODL's excessive and uncritiqued reliance on ICT needs to be examined in the wake of the emergence of an information society and challenges like

cultural diversity and creativity, educational opportunities, public participation, social awareness and responsibility, promotion of peace and citizenship values.

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[**Pandav Nayak** is Professor of Political Science and Director Human Rights at Indira Gandhi National Open University New Delhi, India, Email address: ignouhrp@del3.net.in]