

## Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University A Decennial Perspective

V.S. PRASAD

Professor, Public Administration, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University, Hyderabad - 500 482, Andhra Pradesh, India

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University, BRAOU (formerly known as Andhra Pradesh Open University) completes its first decennium in August 1992. The University, the first of its kind in the country, was established in August 1982 in Andhra Pradesh. The completion of a decade of existence is a critical and memorable event in the history of any institution more so when it has been a path setter in an important area of national uplift. Such events should be occasions to review the expectations and contributions, the strengths and limitations of the system. As an insider the author presents a point of view on the system and offers a critical appreciation of it. The paper has two sections. In Section-I the origin of the University and its development over a decade are discussed. In Section-II the author's reflections on the experiences are presented.

### SECTION I

#### 1. The Origin

In 1982, Andhra Pradesh (A.P.) Government constituted a Committee under the Chairmanship of Professor G. Ram Reddy, to prepare a report on the establishment of an Open University in the State. Based on this report (A.P. Government Report, 1982), the A.P. Legislature enacted the Bill and the University was inaugurated on August 26, 1982 by the then President of India, Giani Zail Singh, thus opening a new chapter in the educational history of the country.

#### 2. The Mandate

The objectives of the Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University as mentioned in the Act of the University are : (APOU Act 1982; BRAOU Act 1992)

- 1) to provide educational opportunities to those students who could not take advantage of institutions of higher learning;
- 2) to realise equal educational opportunities for higher education for a large segment of the population including those in employment, women, including housewives and adults, who wish to upgrade their education or acquire knowledge and studies in various fields through distance education;
- 3) to provide flexibility with regard to eligibility for enrolment, age of entry, choice of courses, methods of learning, conduct of examinations and operations of the programmes;
- 4) to complement the programmes of the existing universities in the State in the field of higher learning so as to maintain the highest standards on par with the

best universities in the country;

- 5) to promote integration within the State through its policies and programmes;
- 6) to offer degree courses and non-degree certificate courses for the benefit of the working population in various fields and for the benefit of those who wish to enrich their lives by studying subjects of cultural and aesthetic values; and
- 7) to make provision for research and for the advancement and dissemination of knowledge.

A perusal of the objectives reveals that the university is expected to play a complementary role in democratising higher education in the state, by providing educational opportunities to hitherto neglected sections. The university is also expected to undertake programmes in the field of continuing education to help the working population to upgrade their skills and knowledge by evolving a flexible system of education.

#### 3. Academic Programmes

At present (1992) the university is offering the following academic programmes:

- 1) Undergraduate Degree Programmes through Arts, Commerce, Science and Social Science Faculties leading to B.A., B.Com., and B.Sc. degrees (1983)
- 2) Post-Graduate Diploma in Public Accounting — PGDPA (offered from 1984)
- 3) Post-Graduate Diploma in Public Relations — PGDPR (offered from 1985)
- 4) Bachelor's Degree in Library and Information Science — B.L.I.Sc. (offered from 1985)

- 5) Certificate Course in Food and Nutrition — C.F.N. (offered from 1989)
- 6) M.Phil. programme in Development Studies — M.Phil. (offered from 1986)
- 7) Ph.D. Programme in Development Studies (offered from 1990)

The University is offering Undergraduate Programmes through English and Telugu media. It has so far developed 98 courses in the Faculties of Arts (20), Commerce (19), Science (25) and Social Science (34). Of these 98 courses, 38 are language courses — English (23), Telugu (5), Hindi (5) and Urdu (5); the remaining 60 courses are available in the two media, namely, English and Telugu. Three courses on Food and Nutrition have been adopted from the Indira Gandhi National Open University. As for the Research Programmes in "Development Studies" leading to M.Phil. and Ph.D. the University has been offering them in collaboration with the Centre for Economics and Social Studies (CESS), a research organisation based in Hyderabad.

#### *Distinct Features of Undergraduate Programmes*

The university started Undergraduate Programmes in pursuance of the first objective of the university, i.e., "to provide educational opportunities to those students who could not take advantage of institutions of higher learning". The distinct features of the undergraduate programmes are :

##### **A. Foundation Courses**

To broaden the knowledge base and ensure an inter-disciplinary foundation, the undergraduate students are required to study four foundation courses: two courses in languages, one each in, English and Telugu/Hindi/Urdu and two more courses, one in Science and Technology and the other in Social Sciences. These are common and compulsory courses for all the first year undergraduate students.

##### **B. Vocational Orientation to Liberal Education Programmes**

The second and third year undergraduate students are required to study core courses and specialised or applied courses. The university, in designing the core and specialised courses, put special emphasis on applied aspects of the disciplines. Applied courses in areas like Poultry, Dairy, Drugs, Public Office Administration, Income Tax etc. are offered as part of the regular courses.

##### **C. Flexibility in the choice of Courses**

The students are allowed flexibility in the choice of optional courses. The student is free to choose optionals from any faculty he likes. For example, the student

may choose Chemistry, Physics and Political Science. This freedom of choice is based on the assumption that the student is the best judge of his interests. However, the university provides counselling, and also observes certain regulations keeping in view the requirements of students, interested in pursuing higher studies.

#### *The Programmes under Preparation*

Preparations are under way to launch Post-Graduate Programmes in Political Science, Public Administration, History, Economics, English Literature, Telugu Literature and Business Administration. The university also has proposals to launch Diploma Programmes in Language and Journalism and Continuing Education Programmes in Law and Society.

#### **4. The Students**

The university started its first academic programmes, i.e., Undergraduate Programmes in the year 1983. Around six thousand students were initially admitted in the first year undergraduate programme. There has been a steady increase in the enrolment of students over the years as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1 : Student Enrolment**

Academic Year	Undergraduate Programmes	Other Programmes	Total
1983-84	6,231	—	6,231
1984-85	11,244	7,284	18,528
1985-86	15,702	1,302	17,004
1986-87	19,271	387	19,658
1987-88	16,505	2,981	19,486
1988-89	16,787	—	16,787
1989-90	16,402	3,270	19,672
1990-91	27,446	2,083	29,529
1991-92	32,027	1,560	33,587
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,61,615</b>	<b>18,867</b>	<b>1,80,482</b>

Table 1 shows the annual student enrolment from the academic year 1983-84 to 1991-92. During the last decade, i.e., 1982-1992 a total of 1,80,482 students were admitted to various programmes. Of these around 90 per cent of students were enrolled for undergraduate programmes.

The university follows the 'open entry' policy for admissions, and so admits students with no prior formal qualifications. Nearly 75 per cent of the students admitted to undergraduate courses belong to this category. The university also caters to the demands of students with formal qualifications who are willing to pursue their education through distance mode. Nearly 25 to 30 per cent of the students belong to this category.

From an analysis of undergraduate student profile the

following trends may be identified. (V.S. Prasad 1988, P. Ramaiah 1990).

- A) The university has been able to extend educational opportunities to many sections of the people who could not think of joining the formal higher education institutions. A large number of students enrolled in the university belong to the non-formal stream, who could not join the formal institutions because of certain restrictions on admissions. To such sections of population the Open University provides access to higher education.
- B) The regional medium of instruction is more popular with the Open University students than English. This indicates the preference of the distance learner for education through mother tongue.
- C) It is mostly the people living in urban areas who have had the advantage of educational opportunities provided by the Ambedkar Open University. A major proportion of these learners come from Hyderabad city and other district headquarters. In this regard, the university is yet to fulfil its objective of extending the opportunities for higher education to rural areas on any significant scale.
- D) The percentage of students drawn from weaker sections, especially the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes is relatively low; 30 per cent are from the Backward Castes and around 10 per cent are from the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes. The remaining 60 per cent are from "other" communities.
- E) Though a substantial number of women are joining the Open University, yet their number is not proportionate to their population. A large number of women students are housewives.
- F) Age-wise details reveal that most of the students are either young or middle-aged. The mean age works out to around 28 years. In fact, over the years the mean age of the students is coming down.
- G) A large number of students are unemployed. The proportion of employed students is not significant. And the percentage of agricultural or industrial workers is at best negligible.

These trends indicate that the B.R. Ambedkar Open University has made only a beginning in democratising educational opportunities.

### 5. Learning Strategies

The university has adopted multi-media means in the learning process: correspondence texts, radio lessons, audio cassettes, video cassettes and face-to-face contact sessions, summer schools and science practical sessions. Of these, the university is heavily dependent on correspondence texts. So far the university has produced 98 courses comprising 2,800 units of print materials, 227

audio lessons (each audio lesson is of 30 minutes duration), 112 video lessons (each video lesson is of around 30 minutes duration) and 1,066 radio lessons (each radio lesson is of around 15 minutes duration). The details of the multi-media course material are given in Table 2.

**Table 2 : Course Materials  
(PRINT, AUDIO, VIDEO AND RADIO LESSONS)**

Sl No	Faculty	No. of Courses	Printed Units	Audio Lessons	Video Lessons	Radio Lessons
1	Arts	20	554	60	23	232
2	Commerce	19	585	37	18	192
3	Science	25	786	41	22	288
4	Social Sciences	34	875	89	49	354
TOTAL		98	2800	227	112	1066

The University is making efforts to strengthen the written materials with the help of face-to-face counselling, audio-video and radio support. In an academic year each Foundation Course is provided with 42 hours of face-to-face contact sessions and each of the other courses is provided with 24 hours of contact sessions. Summer schools provide for the intensive revision of Foundation Courses. In Science subjects, arrangements are made for intensive training in practicals.

The printed texts are developed by a Course Team. A typical BRAOU course team consists of an Editor (Subject Expert), Course Writers (Subject Experts), a Language Editor and Course Coordinator(s) (a faculty member from the subject/department concerned). So far educational technologists and graphic designers have not been associated with the Course Teams as they are not available in sufficient number in the university. The internal faculty members play the dual role of subject experts as well as of educational technologists. The university has a very small contingent of full-time faculty — as in 1992, there are around 50 full-time faculty members in all. They are engaged more in course maintenance and course transformation functions than in course development activities. Most of the course material is developed with the help of the external resource persons. In the beginning the course material was developed in the text book format. In the last couple of years all the materials have been revised and transformed into the distance education format, i.e., the self-instructional format.

### 6. Student Support Services

The Ambedkar Open University has adopted a two tier organisational structure, i.e., Headquarters and Study Centres, to provide student support services. The Headquarters unit is headed by a Director and supported by a number of Deputy Directors and other supporting staff. Besides, there is a strong network of 85 Study Centres

located in different parts of the 23 districts of the State. Even though a few Study Centres are located in remote parts of the State, most of the Study Centres are located in Hyderabad (14) and district headquarters (25). The needs of tribal and interior rural areas deserve more attention and there is a growing demand for the location of study centres to serve these regions.

The Study Centres provide student support services in the form of contact-cum-counselling sessions, science practical sessions, library services, electronic media facilities, summer schools etc. Each Study Centre is managed by a full-time or a part-time Coordinator and assisted by a small secretarial staff. The counselling services are provided by teachers of the conventional system on part-time basis. There are around 2,500 part-time counsellors associated with various academic programmes of the university. Though the jurisdiction of the university in terms of the location of its Study Centres is confined to Andhra Pradesh, students from anywhere in the country are eligible for admission provided they study with the help of the reading material sent to them and appear for the examinations at the centres located in Andhra Pradesh as no study centre facilities are available outside the State.

#### 7. Student Evaluation

The university uses both continuous assessment and year-end examination for assessing the performance of students. The students are continuously assessed through the assignments. This assessment is only for helping the students to improve their learning. The final grade in each course is based on the year-end-examination only. The question papers mainly consist of essay type and short answer type questions. The university conducts examinations twice a year. Thus by and large the university follows the practices of the conventional system as far as student assessment is concerned.

#### 8. Administration

The organisational structure of the university is based on the functional division of the work into four Directorates, under the overall control and guidance of the Vice-Chancellor. The Vice-Chancellor is the academic and executive head of the university. Each directorate is headed by an academic, a senior professor of the university, who is designated as Director. The four directorates, i.e., Academic, Student Services, Material Production and Evaluation, constitute the main functional units of the university and are responsible for the execution of university programmes. The administration is headed by the Registrar, whose main functions relate to establishment, estate management, examinations and public relations. The Finance Officer heads the finance division of the university. The organisational structure of the university is given in Fig. 1.

#### 9. Finance

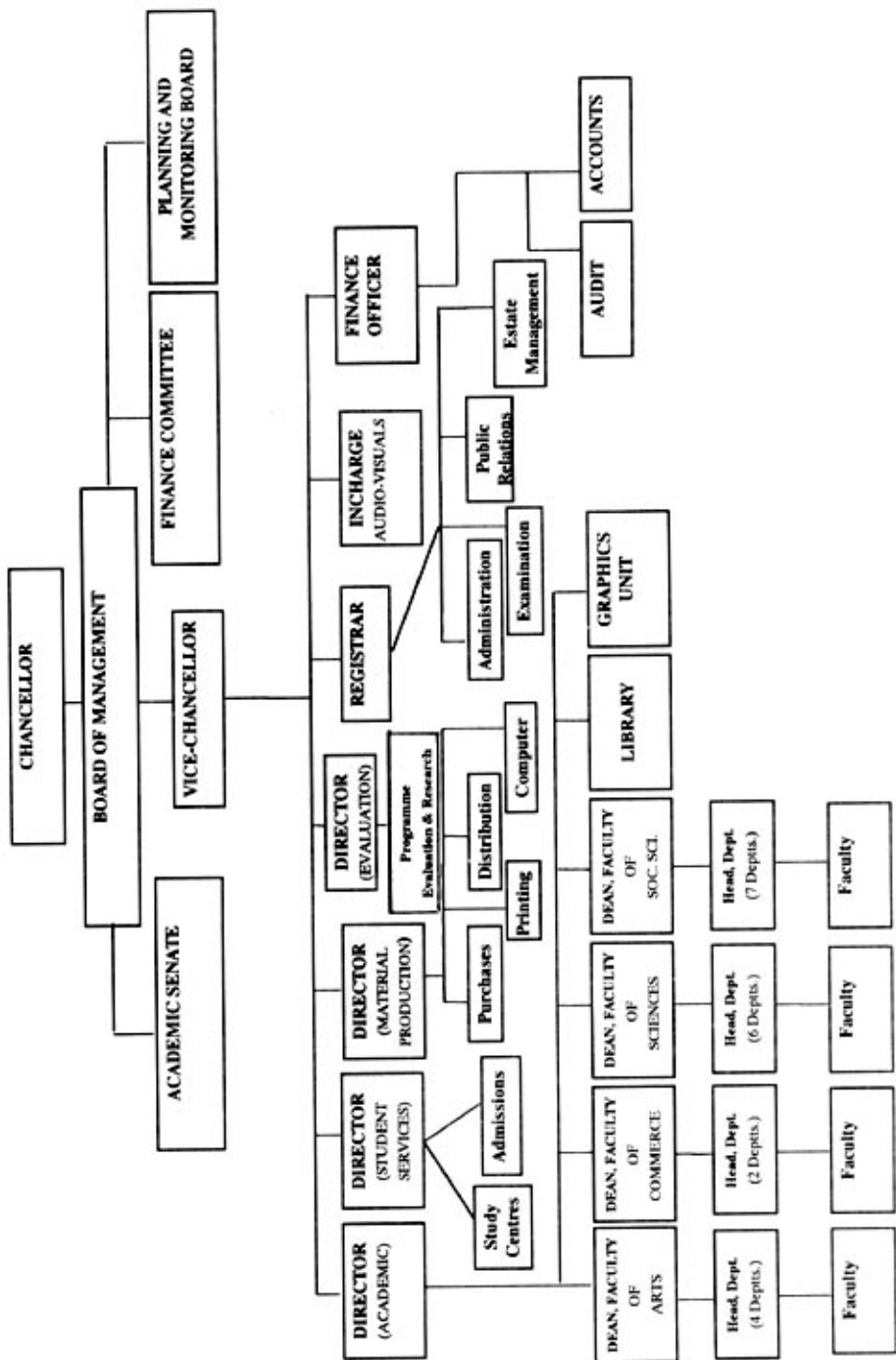
The main sources of university funds are: (a) State Government Grants, (b) University Grants Commission Development Assistance, and (c) Student Tuition Fee. During the Seventh Five Year Plan, i.e., 1985-90, the approximate proportion of income from the above mentioned three sources was: 60 per cent from student tuition fee and approximately 30 per cent from the State Government Grants and 10 per cent from the University Grants Commission Development Assistance. For the Eighth Five Year Plan (1992-1997), Indira Gandhi National Open University is expected to provide Developmental Assistance to the university. The Annual Budget estimate for 1992-93 shows that the total estimated receipts of the university are Rs. 5,73,54,000; Grants Rs. 1,46,79,000; Fees Rs. 4,16,22,000 and miscellaneous Rs. 10,53,000. This shows that around 72 per cent of the receipts are from the student fees and around 25 per cent from the Grants. The total estimated payments for the year 1992-93 are Rs. 5,63,46,100. The major items of expenditure are material production Rs. 1,64,22,800; student services Rs. 1,54,10,000; examinations Rs. 84,84,000; academic Rs. 59,26,000; administration Rs. 54,45,000; and audio-video programmes Rs. 15,97,900. The estimated expenditure pattern shows that Material Production (around 29 per cent) and Student Services (around 27 per cent) are the two main items of expenditure (Budget of BRAOU, 1992-93).

### SECTION II

The Ambedkar Open University has made a beginning in democratising higher educational opportunities in Andhra Pradesh. It is only a beginning and it has yet to go a long way to realise the objectives mentioned in the Act of the university. Ten years is a brief period in the life of an institution, yet the university has gained enough experience to provide some useful lessons for future action. Some of which are as follows :-

- 1) The objectives of the university listed in the Act, do not specify the thrust of the academic programmes, except in general terms. In contrast to this, the Maharashtra Open University Act clearly mentions that the thrust of the university academic programmes should be "to make higher vocational and technical education available to large sections of the population" (Deshpande, 1992). The Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University Act also clearly states that the people in rural areas and women, as special target groups should receive university's special attention. This type of unambiguous mandate in the Act provides a useful benchmark for assessing the performance of the institution. The characteristic of a good mandate is that it should be broad enough to meet the diverse needs of the situation and specific enough to provide clues for operational direction of the system. The Ambedkar Open

DR. B.R. AMBEDKAR OPEN UNIVERSITY



University should evolve a relevant mission which is more specific and unambiguous.

- 2) The present undergraduate academic programmes of the university have a liberal education bias. Initially the university started the undergraduate programmes to reduce the pressure on the conventional system. These undergraduate programmes also met the working population's urge for liberal education degrees. The increasing enrolment in undergraduate programmes indicates the social need for such programmes. The university is justified in starting and continuing undergraduate programmes as it has an obligation to respond to social needs. Now, it is time to diversify the academic programmes.

The New Education Policy rightly emphasised the need to relate university education to 'development'. The academic programmes of the university must contribute to the development of human resources. Here, the technical/vocational programmes make a significant contribution in generating necessary human skills for social and economic development. In offering technical/vocational programmes the Ambedkar Open University's experience shows that there is a need for assessing the social and market demand for these programmes. To make vocational programmes relevant, they should be started only on the basis of systematic manpower need assessment. The building and maintenance of effective linkage with user organisations is also a pre-requisite for preparing effective vocational programmes.

The academic thrust of the university in the second decade should be on :

- a) vocationalisation of undergraduate liberal education programmes.
  - b) starting vocational programmes for imparting skills to special target groups like rural workers, tribals, women and industrial workers, and
  - c) continuing education programmes for working population.
- 3) The student profile indicates a strong urban and middle class bias. The distance education system seems to be extending the educational opportunities to the same target groups which the conventional universities cater to. This is partly because of the nature of the programmes and overall development strategies. There is a need to make special efforts to attract a larger number of students from rural areas and weaker sections.
- 4) Print is the main medium used in the learning process. The pedagogic standard of the printed texts should be improved by making more effective use of self-instructional designs. Workbooks/work manuals may be produced for exercises and for two way communication. Supplementary material may be provided to update the content of the texts. The qual-

ity of the printing should be improved to generate spontaneous interest in the learners. In the development of print material, there should be scope for experimentation. In certain cases it may be more desirable to build the course material centred on standard works already available in the market.

- 5) The university has not been able to make extensive use of the audio-visual medium. At the moment the available audio-video programmes function as supplements to the print material, and experience shows that the use of the electronic media should be more selective requiring careful planning. The non-availability of well trained resource persons in software development, poor infrastructural facilities, low level of accessibility and lack of enthusiasm on the part of learners are some of the reasons for the inability of the university to make effective use of electronic media (Rumble and Harry 1982; Reddy, 1988).
- 6) The student support services need further strengthening. The face-to-face contact programmes are mainly used for providing tutorial and counselling services to students. There is a demand for more face-to-face contact programmes. The present system of Ambedkar Open University lays emphasis on uniformity, i.e., the same number of contact programmes for all undergraduate programmes. It is desirable to evolve a more flexible and varied system of student services to meet the diverse needs of a variety of programmes and students. At present, Study Centres are mostly located in urban and semi-urban places. In addition to strengthening the present Study Centres, more Centres may be located in the interior rural and tribal habitations. The student support services need to be extended to remote areas by means of mobile counselling and contact programmes.
- 7) The administrative structure has many weaknesses, most of which arise from the general failure to foster a sense of inter-dependence among the various units and functionaries. Another weak factor of the structure is the absence of an effective planning and monitoring mechanism. The system also needs decentralisation and need-based flexible administrative responses. Unlike the conventional system, the distance education system is more administration dependent. The experience of the Ambedkar Open University shows that administration is one of the critical variables in the efficient functioning of the system.
- 8) The Ambedkar Open University mainly depends on the faculty members of the conventional universities for developing its course materials. The faculty members who joined the university on permanent basis are also from the conventional system. Though a few training/orientation programmes for orienting/re-

orienting the staff to the needs of the open learning system have been organized from time to time, much is to be done in this area. Steps need to be taken to create an appropriate organisational structure to design proper curriculum for and to impart training to distance educators in a systematic manner.

- 9) The university is yet to evolve and execute a systematic staffing pattern of academic departments. Most of the departments have only one/two full-time faculty members. There is a need to strengthen the faculty according to explicitly stated criteria for "core" strength in each discipline and evolve rational contractual staffing policies and work norms.

The assembly-line model of working of the university is partly responsible for a feeling of alienation and loss of identity among the teaching staff. The staff who were initially over worked, are showing the symptoms of having burnt out. This needs immediate remedial measures. More research facilities — institutional and subject oriented — should be provided to staff. The monotony of working on development of materials should be reduced by diversifying the activities of the staff. Dr. James A. Maraj, President, Commonwealth of Learning, in his inaugural address at the 'International Seminar on Technical and Vocational Programmes through Distance Education' held at Hyderabad, rightly observed that "the open universities should try to avoid the risk of becoming open and ceasing to be universities while

trying to accommodate increasing demands placed on them"

### Conclusion

The Ambedkar Open University, during the first decade of its functioning, made significant contribution to distance education at higher level in the country. As the first of its kind in the country, it had no native models to follow, so it had to evolve a system of operations over a period of time by trial and error method. As a result opportunities have been extended for undergraduate education to a large number of non-formal stream of students who could never think of joining the formal higher education institutions. Besides, reasonable contributions have been made to improve the quality of undergraduate education by producing high quality printed study materials. These materials are also used by students of other correspondence institutions and conventional colleges. Another significant contribution of the university is in the provision of Student Support Services. A strong network of study centres has been established to provide counselling services to students. This had a positive impact on correspondence institutes of conventional universities in the state which have now started establishing study centres for student services. In the coming years the Ambedkar Open University needs to concentrate on consolidation, diversification and networking by evolving more responsive administrative structures and academic offerings.

### REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. Government of Andhra Pradesh, (1982) *Towards an Open Learning System*, Report of the Committee on the Establishment of an Open University, Hyderabad. (Chairman : G. Ram Reddy).
2. Government of Andhra Pradesh, *Andhra Pradesh Open University Act, 1982*, Hyderabad.
3. Greville Rumble and Keith Harry (eds), (1982) *The Distance Teaching Universities*, Croom Helm, London.
4. G. Ram Reddy (ed), (1988) *Open Universities - The Ivory Towers Thrown Open*, Sterling Publishers, New Delhi.
5. Prakash M Deshpande, (1992) "Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University and its academic Programmes". *Indian Journal of Open Learning*, Vol 1, No 1, Indira Gandhi National Open University.
6. V.S. Prasad, (1990) "APOU Learner Profile : A Case Study" in Koul, B.N. et al (eds), *Studies in Distance Education*, AIU and IGNOU, New Delhi, 1988. Similar conclusions on student profile were drawn in a recent study by P. Ramaiah et al., "A Study of Student Profile in Andhra Pradesh Open University", Centre for Evaluation, APOU, Hyderabad, (mimeographed).