

Education for Social Change: Role of Distance Education in Tribal Upliftment

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One of the proclaimed aims of Distance Education in India and other developing countries is to reach the hitherto unreached sections of the population who are effectively kept out of the educational as well as the social mainstream. Tribal people in India are one such neglected section. Prasanna Kumar explores the possibilities of opening them relevant educational programmes through open universities. Since the open universities are already offering some programmes in Rural Development, Women's Studies and Health Care, we felt that the suggestions and proposals made in this paper towards tribal upliftment should also find a place in the agenda of the open universities.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper an attempt is made to argue the case for using distance-teaching systems in the development of tribal people. There are two main reasons for this argument. The first is that we need an educated population, including those living in tribal areas, if we are to realize real and rapid development. The second is, that the inculcation of skills development and the spirit of community hygiene, leadership training and participatory culture among the isolated tribal groups, the lowest in the social and also educational ladder is absolutely needed. But this cannot be effected if we rely solely on campus-based institutions because of the expenses involved and the known rigidities of the formal system. And so the most flexible and the most easily adaptable alternative is distance mode education.

Chitnis (1978 : 243) suggests that if tribals are to be liberated from their backwardness, it may be necessary to postpone programmes of literacy and numeracy in their education and accord priority to programmes that make them aware of their existing situation, conscious of their rights, and build confidence in them to fight for their rights.

Article 46 of the Indian Constitution lays down a directive principle of State policy. It provides: "The State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the people and in particular of the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes, and shall protect them from social injustices and all forms of exploitation." Yet 79% of the tribals in India remain illiterate and orthodox.

A.R. Desai (1967 : 102-3) observes rightly that "the Government did not consider the supply of education entirely its own responsibility. Nor did it consider it as an essential necessity to every Indian, to be provided free of cost, and compulsorily." This being the policy of the government one can imagine the state of education among

backward classes, especially the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes.

The following conclusions would emerge with regard to educational development since independence:

- The goal of free and compulsory education for all those upto the age of 14 as stipulated in article 45 of the constitution (within 10 years from its commencement i.e. 1950 is not yet realized.
- The norm of formal education had moved steeply upward.
- There is a growing recognition of importance of women's as well as tribal education.

With this ground reality, we are proclaimedly geared ahead towards "Education for all by 2000 AD". Can it be a fruitful journey without adopting new institutions and approaches?

FORMAL EDUCATION AND THE WEAKER SECTIONS

Education has become a major instrument of social change. The Education Commission (1966: 7-8) observed that "The realization of the country's aspiration involves changes in the knowledge, skills interest and values of the people as a whole. This is basic to every programme of social and economic betterment of which India stands in need If this change on a grand scale is to be achieved without violent revolution, there is one instrument, and one instrument only, that is Education."

Can the present formal education system help to break the privileges, eliminate exploitation and open up opportunity for the advancement of the weaker sections of the society? Coomb (1970:105) believes that education includes informal, formal and non-formal methods of learning. He defines the formal educational system the hierarchically structured, chronologically graded educational system running from primary school through university. This inflexible formal educational system is not meant to reach

all the sections of a society and all the categories of men and women. Only the privileged groups, by and large, avail themselves of educational facilities through schools, colleges, universities and technological institutions.

Children of the tribal poor either do not enter this system at all or drop out from it before they have gained anything beneficial by way of education and work-requirements. The fixed point of entry and exit of formal education makes it even more difficult for persons from the weaker sections of the society to re-enter it.

The formal education system, because of its rigid chronologically graded structure, excludes the tribes from its advantages.

WHAT ELSE IF NOT THE FORMAL EDUCATION?

Open Education acquires a definite role here in developing the right kind of social values, attitudes and habits among the tribals. A person who condemns dowry and also supports education of women, has socially desirable values. Condemning exploitation of children and promoting literacy are also socially desirable virtues. Belief and practice of the small family norm, equality of men and women in education and employment are equally desirable. Therefore, education of India's diehard conformist tribes cannot be achieved overnight through expansion of rigid formal structures but by developing culturally synchronised new structures and programmes based on:

- Information and knowledge about environment,
- Knowledge about social, economic, scientific and technological changes in the midst of which young people live and work.
- Elementary principles of health, hygiene, child-care, and nutrition.
- Introductory, occupational and vocational skill programmes to prepare the learners for a job, or for self-employment.
- Basic skills in reading, writing and arithmetic.

In India, where despite increase in food production, poverty and malnutrition continue to exist, it is all the more essential to create awareness about nutrition and a wholesome diet. Besides poverty, religious and social taboos also work against healthy living and eating nutritious foods. The ways and means of reaching the innocent tribal people through open education must be explored, for it appears to be the only form of education to which they can respond. Poor sanitation, unsafe drinking water and ignorance of even elementary hygiene are the common causes of infectious diseases from which children of weaker sections who live in slums mostly suffer. Though these diseases have their origin in poverty, lack of health education and absence of civic awareness are also contributing factors.

A scenario of this nature would obviously entice the open learning systems to have its clientele like this:

1. Tribals who never went to school
2. Tribals who dropped out from schools

3. Unemployed tribal youth in search of jobs
4. women and tribal chieftains

Given the complexity of this clientele and the proven failure of formal system in reaching out to the complex needs of these farflung tribals, it is relevant here to quote from the core group Report on Education appointed by the Planning Commission (February 1992) that "Open Learning System has tremendous potential to achieve the 8th plan objectives of "education for all, vocationalisation of education, training and retraining for wage employment and self employment of the rural population."

HOW SUITABLE IS DISTANCE EDUCATION?

Distance mode of education is known for its flexibility. It is less restrictive in terms of prerequisites, namely pre-entry qualifications, duration of study, age, place of study, etc. Its other attributes are that: it uses methods of teaching based on real-life situations; accepts students from all walks of life without the rigid formalities of the traditional system; and it adapts the learning process to the needs of the learner's own setting, although with some limitations. Moreover, a variety of teaching media are employed, such as printed lessons, radio, TV and telephones wherever possible, and the precise curricula and content is as close as possible to the learner's felt needs. Above all at the sublime level, it considers education as a life process and a stimulus for personal perfection in juxtaposition to social advancement.

With the above parameters of flexibility distance mode of education needs to shoulder the responsibility of educating the tribals with the following academic objectives:

- To advance professional and vocational skills among tribals
- To prepare individuals for self-employment
- To complement formal education in a country of largely uneducated people
- To raise the level of functional literacy
- To re-educate the dropouts from formal education system
- To retrain adults for the changing requirements of jobs and family life
- To provide life-long education

The underlying logic behind these objectives is that When a person has acquired some new information, skills, or attitudes which can be of use to him or her, the person is considered to be 'educated', since education means change in one's behaviour and improvement of one's abilities, and shaping of one's attitudes.

DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAMME FOR THE TRIBAL FARMERS — A PROPOSAL

Distance education can give the rural folk direction in developing their economy, ways and means of solving their financial problems, skills development, proper utilisation of leisure, professional growth and most importantly inculcating in them a scientific temper. The

age old methods of shifting cultivation need to be replaced by exposing tribals to the modern methods through the video network of distance education system.

Besides, Women's education, education of the drop-outs, adult education, if adopted by the Open Universities, would provide dynamism to the programmes of family welfare, energy conservation, prevention of deforestation, health care, immunisation and child development. The values of cooperation, fellow feeling and progressive outlook would be created through the Open Universities, if community leadership development and participatory communication programmes are developed. Most Indian tribes being forest based illiterate agricultural labourers, the need of the hour is the occupational modernisation of these tribes. As such the proposal seeks to address the following basic issues:

- a) Identifying the linkages between the Open University system and the development programmes for the weaker sections with special reference to adult non-formal components.
- b) Content areas related to the development of agricultural labourers among the tribes.
- c) Modalities to deliver the content through Open University system.
- d) Administrative structure of support systems for implementing the distance education programmes designed.
- e) Identifying specific functionaries for the delivery system for purposes of training through distance education.
- f) Defining the exact role of the Department of Adult and Continuing Education, as a coordinating agency among the Open Universities the functionaries (of the delivery system) and the beneficiaries.

Once the institutional policy issues are answered properly by the political executive, then the educational packages on health, sanitation, nutrition, family welfare, population education and literacy need to be prepared and delivered through the Open University system initially, followed by modular courses on skills development. The Open Universities can act as a resource agency for monitoring, preparation and administration of the development programmes. The agencies which can communicate with the Open Universities are as follows:

- (i) The department of Adult and Continuing Education located near the target population which could act as a nodal agency,
- (ii) The development departments can function as departments providing inputs and
- (iii) The Tribal Research Institute can act as the academic coordinating agency.

THE INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE OF OPEN LEARNING

The British Open University under its continuing education programme runs a few courses on food production,

pest and disease management etc. The Central Agricultural Radio Television School in China is one of the largest national distance education institutes communicating the modern research developments in agriculture to its farmers. The AL-QUDS Open University in Arab countries offers a degree programme in land and rural development.

With regard to practical work, the attempts to develop experiment kits (e.g., by the United Kingdom Open University in science and technology, by Everyman's University in electronics, by the Free University of Iran in health sciences for training para-medical staff) has proved successful.

In Senegal, the Radio Educative Programme (Counta, 78) fostered, took note of and acted upon feed-back from farmers in ways that have had far-reaching practical effects. This feed-back from the farmers took the form of recordings made in the field and of letters.

Members of listening groups dictated letters, with a handful of literate members doing double duty (as listeners and as scribes), to the higher-ups in government and to the President himself. In these letters, the peasants aired their complaints, exposed what they believed to be cases of government ineptitude, and took the government to task for standing behind unfair or shortsighted policies — all this they did without fear of censure and with the intention of being heard. The out come was President Senghor was persuaded to standardize the price given to groundnut producers and to annul in 1970 the debts the peasants contracted in the purchase of seeds, agricultural equipment, and supplies.

The Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) of Pakistan (which has been teaching since 1975) runs a functional education programme in tractor maintenance to its farmers which has been very popular. Pakistan has a population of some 70 million people of whom 80 per cent live in rural areas and only about 22 per cent are literate. Even so, it does not necessarily follow that the AIOU puts literacy at the head of its priorities. For example, in some least developed countries hygiene, avoiding problems at birth, growing more and better crops, and so on are often considered to be more important. The AIOU has found that social awareness programmes have lead to improved cleanliness and hygiene in kitchens, for example, and to the building of brick drains for the first time in some villages.

A number of Distance Teaching institutions in the less developed countries such as the AIOU (Pakistan), the Open University of Javeriana in Colombia, the National Open University of Venezuela, the Sukothi athammathirat Open University in Thailand, the State University at a Distance in Costa Rica, and the Free University of Iran are currently engaged in imparting skill based education to their illiterate rural poor.

CURRICULA FOR THE TRIBAL AND RURAL POOR

The range of curricula designed for the rural adults

covered by Open Learning institutions is wide. Given the vividness of tribal life styles across the Indian hills, this however, can be classified into two main areas of concern — (1) functional education for various occupational groups among the tribal workers, and (2) general awareness education for the tribal population. These may be in the nature of:

- Programmes for farmers and other agricultural, livestock and fishery workers.
- Programmes for group leaders among tribes on constitutional rights, participation in Panchayat Raj and community development programmes.
- Programmes for social service workers, voluntary service organisations, and also programmes on:
 - general education for the adult population;
 - basics of functional literacy and numeracy;
 - functional 'academic' subjects such as arithmetic, languages, elementary socio-economics and general knowledge;
 - health and nutrition;

- community education; and
- home science and family planning.

ORGANISATION

The vast network of Girijan cooperatives, ITDA offices, village panchayats and of various voluntary organisations could be utilised as outreach centres for the educational packages developed by the Open Universities. At the States level the Directorates of Tribal Educational Open Outreach to be constituted under the Ministry of Tribal welfare should be made responsible for developing the audio-visual packages in collaboration with State Open Universities, Audio Visual Research Centres, SIET etc. The IRDAs can be made intermediary level extension, and monitoring authorities.

Times change so also the tools and technologies and more so ideas and needs. The key to success in a rapidly progressing human social order lies in "Tackling today's problem with today's tools only, instead of yesterday's".

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