

Social Justice : Disabilities
Knowledge and Skill Acquisition from a Distance:
Meeting the Changing Demands of Disadvantaged

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In India there has been a rapid expansion of campus centric higher education system in terms of number of institutions, student enrolments, growth rate etc. in the previous three decades and the same is visible in open and distance education (ODE). The system has undergone a unique transformation from an elitist to an egalitarian one. Therefore, all sections of the society have benefitted as a result of added access. However, the disparities between the disadvantaged and non disadvantaged groups have widened. Ours is a country with “eco-politico-socio” diversities, which also exist on the cultural, religious and geographical basis. The diversities resulted into psychological division among the people due to inequality of opportunities. Thus the line between the privileged and less privileged becomes more visible throwing a few social classes out of mainstream. In spite of the efforts of government for equitable and planned development of the country, the evils of poverty, illiteracy and disparities have never been overcome. In the kinds of inequality exist the most unfortunate and pernicious is in educational opportunities. This inequality ultimately proves detrimental in the overall growth and development of the country. Therefore, there is a need to provide special attention and opportunities to the traditional disadvantaged population in a democratic society like ours. No government can afford to ignore social justice and economic development for underprivileged sections of the society for a long time. Within this backdrop our constitution provides a provision for ‘equality of opportunities’.

Kothari Commission on education observed and stated, “One of the important social objective of education is to equalize opportunities enabling the backward and underprivileged classes and individuals to use education as a lever for the improvement of their conditions. Every society that values social justice and is anxious to improve the lot of talent must ensure equality of opportunity to all sections of society”

Likewise, the National Policy of Education (1986 updated 1992), states that, “the new policy will lay special emphasis on the removal of disparities and to equalize educational opportunity by attending to the specific needs of those who have been denied equality so far (Para 1 NPE 1992)”.

The objectives specified in the NPE are considered as benchmarks to constitute a democratic society and for the first time “equality” was given priority over other issues. The given statement seeks to remove inequalities based on gender, race religion, region, economic status or caste together with an improvement of quality of education.

This paper attempts to explain the need of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) for the specific disadvantaged population so as to meet their changing demand for knowledge and skill acquisition. There are no controversies amongst the ODE experts on the belief, that easy access to education is crucial, almost central, to the open and distance education system.

The Underprivileged Groups

A sizeable number of India’s population constitute the “underprivileged” mass socially, economically, as well as culturally and has been not provided the development of human asset. Social thinkers in India identify following categories of our population as deprived groups:

- Scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and other backward communities
- Women in remote and rural areas
- People living in hilly areas, deserts or isolated places
- Tribal
- Physically challenged
- Underprivileged people on the basis of religion
- The rural deprived: Landless farm laborers, small and marginal farmers, rural artisans, fisherman shepherds, monks, mendicants and vagrants
- The urban have notes: beggars, casual and unorganized laborers, child labor, rickshaw pullers, slum dwellers, prostitutes, house assistance workers, roadside vendors etc.

The above groups have been disadvantaged in their own stead; their educational backwardness has ever been a matter of great challenge for the planners and human resource development policy makers. The problem of disadvantaged is also a result of discriminatory distribution of power and economic resources. The ODL has a major role to play in taking modern education and skills to the door steps of such deprived groups. It is having potential to take care of demand and supply equation in higher education. According to a study the formal system is having a capacity to meet only 7 per cent of the need of the educational aspirants in 18-23 age groups (Kishore 1999). In addition the scope of expansion of campus centric higher education system is limited primarily due to need for heavy investment (Ansari 1994). Hence, it is required to focus the efforts and resources towards the ODL to educate the deprived groups so as to provide them opportunity to learn and develop.

Illiteracy has been the hindering force of India's growth. It is estimated that 60 to 70 per cent of our rural population has not attended any formal schooling. Moreover, amongst those who attended schools, dropout percentage is significant at various stages. The outcome of this is a plentiful availability of unqualified and unskilled workforce with the result that the opportunity cost of labor is almost nil. The situation is worse at the higher education level. Following are the reasons of inability of conventional mode of education to meet the demand for education:

- Demand for education is increasing in a multifold fashion as compared to increase in investment. Private funding in higher education is negligible in rural areas and solely inspired by profit motive.
- The conventional system is full of rigidities pertaining to age, attendance, syllabi, timings, evaluation, course of study etc. resulting into alienation of learners from the system.
- Education is still considered as essential to enable livelihood, therefore, treated to be non essential for women in some communities and areas.
- The belief that education prevents to earn and therefore child labor (in spite of prohibitory laws) continues for boys and girls and in both rural as well as in urban areas.

Irrelevance of ODE Programs

Some of the ODE course curricula are irrelevant to the real life needs of the underprivileged population. For example it is estimated that almost 85 per cent of IGNOU enrolments is from urban dwellers out of which 80 percent are males and almost 70 percent are registered for management and computer related programs which are not relevant to unorganized workforce rural / farmer's life. A large number of education seekers are denied access because of the irrelevance of the programs. Probably we have a psyche which takes care of the needs of urban and privileged sections while designing course curricula in ODL, so as to increase enrolments at once. This denies democratic norms to reach the unreached. Perhaps, the planners may have an intention to generate enough earning by charging good amount of money for those programs intended to meet the need of rich, urban and self employed classes. Although the Distance Education Council (DEC) aims to extend education to the disadvantaged groups of our country, the real progress seems to be a patch work in meeting the goal. The country requires technical and skilled manpower, particularly to elevate the status of under privileged sections in view of the opening up of economy. Development of appropriate skills can thus be an important intervention to increase the productivity of the existing workforce as well as future aspirants.

A growing need is being noticed for an education system that is flexible and can encourage creativity as well as critical thinking. Today organization and individual are both learning organisms and therefore the planners have to be proactive in imbibing new knowledge and skills to meet the emerging needs. ODL is fast becoming an accepted and indispensable part of the mainstream of education system both in developed and developing countries. The ODL has different meaning and potentials to different stakeholders. It opens new horizons for the learners by way of increased access and flexibility. This also combines work and education and ensuring a more learner – centered approach, new ways of interaction and finally achieving higher quality standards.

Open and Distance Learning: To Ensure Access and Equity

In higher education, estimates reveals that inequality in opportunities will keep exist, keeping in view the projected population growth (UNESCO, 2000). In addition, low qualify, irrelevance and non-availability of required resources are other major threats. Within this backdrop, one should not expect from conventional educational system to cater for the need for knowledge and skill acquisition. To meet the changing demand for education and training ODL in general and for disadvantaged in particular may be considered as an approach having certain capabilities which are worthwhile and mentioned here under:

- Pedagogically strong and adaptable in dissemination of knowledge
- Add on and also substitute to campus focused educational system
- Flexibility, freedom and easy access
- Varied modes of acquiring knowledge and skills
- Capability to overcome geographical, individual constraints, and inability to build infrastructure
- Complete range of programs and courses
- Can be pursued while working on a job
- Economic and cost-effective alternative
- Wide choice and learner-centered
- Joint investment of money and cost by seeker and provider to accomplish common goals
- Assists in communication and work related skills resulting into increased productivity
- Increasing and consolidating the overall potential
- Providing opportunity to keep updated, refresh, relearn and enrich the existing knowledge
- Eliminating inequalities pertaining to different age groups
- Reach to all geographical locations irrespective of difficult approach
- Potential to deliver knowledge and skills to large number of aspirants
- Tailor made programs or courses for key target groups
- Speedy and efficient access
- Capacity to provide education in emerging and interdisciplinary areas
- Empowerment by providing multiple competencies through life long education
- Opportunity to learn during work and family life
- Inculcating best practices prevailed anywhere in the world
- Adding quality dimension in existing educational offerings.

A Paradigm Shift

New initiatives are taking place in Indian educational system in India after 90's when our union government has allowed access to internet and 15 IPs. At present more than 100 institutions are offering ODL, which reveals that we have availed the opportunity existing in the environment and are ranked as the second country in the world where information technology revolution has taken place. In 11th five year plan, the Indian government decided to spend 6 percent of GDP on education with a plan to increase enrolment in higher education from existing 9 to 10 per cent to 15 per cent by 2012. To accomplish the goal, the government planned 1,500 new universities / institutions of higher learning (XI plan approach paper). Likewise, acknowledging the role of ODL government has plans to increase existing figure of 2.5-3 million students who study through distance mode (i.e. 20% enrolment in higher education) to 7 million students (i.e. 30% enrolment in higher education) by 2015. The policymakers also planned to further the reach of education to the remotest areas of the country.

The government decided to accomplish following objectives through the use of ICT in the next five years:

- Utilizing appropriate and cost effective ways of providing knowledge
- Offering learning opportunities to seekers from remote and rural area
- Ensuring reach of best teachers to all learner's location
- Providing access to education any time and at any place
- Improving existing student support services and providing self learning modules
- Using mass media for mass education
- Providing alternative and supplementary learning tools by using multi media
- Community focused approach – to overcome disparities
- Providing fun filled learning experience through – Do It Yourself (DIY) activities
- Establishing virtual learner communities from all age groups, nationalities, cultural & socio – economic backgrounds
- Providing quality of education through benchmarking
- Sharing best practices with other providers anywhere and enabling its reach to the disadvantaged learners

EDUSAT: A Significant Contribution for K – Reach

The Indian government made it possible to empower learners through launch of educational satellite. The EDUSAT enables knowledge to reach at the most remote area of the country. Being a joint project of ISRO, MHRD and various state governments, it is catering to government, publicly funded institutions and private establishments. It had planned to reach in remote and inaccessible places and tried to cover almost all the states. It covers all segments of education with a priority to empower teachers in emerging area like Biotechnology, Nanotechnology, VLSI, MIMS etc. Education Satellite also enabled reach of quality teachers to the remotest places. The system had objectives to meet the challenge of number and quality through providing effective teachers training, supplementing the curriculum based teaching, increased community participation and monitoring and providing access to most effective faculty in higher and vocational education. It has triggered off several new steps in ODL like establishment of CIET, CEC, EMRC and IGNOU – SITE, Training and Development Communication Channel, Gramsat, Pilot Project, Jhabua Development Commutation Project etc. Education Satellite provides Video Interactive Teaching facility which is considered as major support to institutions of higher learning. Therefore, it is a commitment in taking education at every door step of the nation and provides access to emerging technologies.

Variety of Segments

It is considered that underprivileged learners belong to heterogeneous categories. Their variability is based on economic status, social class, geographical area, gender, culture, religion, caste and the most predominant is their orthodox mind set. This heterogeneity needs varied progressive knowledge imparting programs which can cater to their specific needs. The campus centric mode of education does not have capability to address the individual needs. On the other hand, ODL system is fully commensurable to deal with the pressures being faced by the variety of disadvantaged groups. Looking into the peculiar features like freedom, flexibility, multimedia approach, learning support and individualized study the ODL mechanism is considered as best fitted for providing education to all. Moreover, when clientele will be larger, the system will prove to be cost effective and cheaper.

Suggestions

On the basis of above background the following steps should be undertaken to extend the ODL system to reach the disadvantaged segments:

- To understand access-barriers and inequities, an in-depth study covering all groups should be undertaken in regard to the needs and profile of the target groups. This will enable to design suitable programs, delivery mechanism and use of appropriate media.

- Need to identify new devices to ensure access instead of focusing only upon the learners' autonomy.
- Identification of most appropriate course – curricula for the different disadvantaged groups.
- Need to uncover the efficacy of the existing delivery and evaluation systems and to identify required changes to increase efficacy.
- Need to provide fee concession in courses / programs for the disadvantaged segment run by distance education wing of conventional universities.
- More involvement of NGOs and local institutions to ensure delivery of programs being developed in local or regional languages.
- Availability of earmarked resources to develop courses for underprivileged groups.
- Formulation of education policy to cater disadvantaged groups through ODL system.
- More programs for capacity building and imbibing multi-skill amongst disadvantaged groups at nominal fee.
- Use of mobile vans and publicity material to inform the benefits and building awareness about various programs / courses available through ODL.
- Involvement of social reformers, better informed people, teachers to propagate and persuade people about the utility of courses of various durations.
- The success stories of learners from underprivileged groups should be widely disseminated through visuals so as to induce and involve people of similar background.

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