Survey of Research in Indian Distance Education

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ABSTRACT :

Tradition of research in Indian distance education is not very strong. Only after the establishment of India Gandhi National Open University in 1985 serious research began. Distance education is a branch of general education and therefore distance education research and practices have been influenced by research on adult learning. Most of the research studies in Indian distance education are descriptive in nature. Some writers like Arun Gupta, Santosh K Panda, Ramesh C Sharma, P Satyanarayna, Lokesh Koul, Sanjay Mishra analysed and reviewed research studies. Broadly three concerns about research are highlighted – comprehensiveness, methodology and coverage of research problems studies. There is a need to develop conceptual framework for research. Integration of research philosophies methods and designs would benefit the developments of theory and practice in distance education.

Keywords: Research, Technical Environment, Descriptive, Fragmentary, Analysis, Challenges, Conceptual Framework, Research Agenda.

1. INTRODUCTION :

Research is a critical and creative activity undertaken on systemic discipline basis and dedicated to increasing knowledge. Research can contribute to knowledge through discoveries or innovative ideas and techniques, conceptual refinements or constructive critiques and syntheses.

The tradition of research in Indian distance education is not very strong and sound. Infact only after the establishment of IGNOU in 1985, esearch activity began. Practically for about two decades from the beginning of correspondence courses in Conventional Universities, research was a low priority.

Distance education is a branch of general education and, therefore, distance educational research and practices have been influenced by the research on adult learning.

Pioneering Effort

M.B. Buch was the pioneer in the field of educational research in India. (1974 to 1991). All the researches on distance education were included in the fifth survey (1971-92). In the fifth survey of educational research, the studies on distance education dealt with enrolment trends, courses growth, needs and characteristics of learners, development of

course materials, instructional strategies, economics, evaluation of the system etc covering the period from 1971 to 1992. The survey was confined to 59 research studies.

The Report of the Madhava Menon Committe to suggest measures to regulate education through distance mode stated that distance education research has grow. It says

"*Research and development forms the backbone of any system in order to bring in quality and standards. Being a dynamic system driven by societal, economic and technological changes, ODL has been changing rapidly and dramatically. The changing technological environment of distance education and paradigm shift affecting it needs to be periodically reviewed. Also the growing acceptance of open and distance learning system in our country and the innovations being an integral part of the ODL system it has become imperative to evaluate the system periodically. There is ampke proff of growth of distance education research which is evident from the increasing number of journals, seminars, workshops, symposia etc analyzing the growth of the system*" (Govt of India, 2011).

2. CLASSIFICATION OF RESEARCH

Broadly researches in Distance Education have been classified into the following heads:
- Growth of Distance Education Policy, Planning and Management
- Programmes and Courses
- Distance Learners
- Course Development and Evaluation
- Output and Impact of Distance Education
- Instructional process
- Economics of DE

ANALYSIS AND REVIEW

Most of the research studies in distance education in India are descriptive in nature and not research studies in the real sense. Some attempts have been made by some writers to classify and review research studies in distance education in India. Among these who analyzed and reviewed studies, the prominent ones are Arun Gupta and Renu Arun (1986), Sujatha (1988), Panda(1992), Sahoo (1992), Satyanarayana(1996), Panda, Satyanarayana and Sharma (1996), Murali Manohar (1996), Lokesh Koul (1997, 2006), Pushpa Ramakrishna and Prasad (1999), Sanjay Mishra (2002), Satyanarayana and Sesharathnam (2004), Subbarao (20004).

Arun Gupta and Renu Arun (1986) classified the contributions of Indian writers to distance education till the advent of the Open University system in India into eleven categories and critically observed:
- A significant number of contributions happened to be the addresses of the VIPs in education circles in different committees, conferences and workshops. In other words, these writings were primarily meant for the consumption of a particular audience/target group and can be described as the speeches / papers of the hour. At best, these reflected the current thinking of the organizations / departments to which the writers belonged and did not reflect a serious attempt to grspple with the issues and from academic and research angles. No wonder the impact of these writings was marginal.

- There existed no specialized journal/publication/newsletter exclusively devoted to the dissemination of latest thoughts and practices in the field of distance education at the regional, state or national levels.
- A significant proportion of the literature devoted to the description or explanation of distance education, its concepts, underlying principles, problems and difficulties especially in the domain of higher education as also ramifications of distance education in the context of developing countries. A good deal of duplication in the content could be observed in these contributions. A significant characteristic of literature was relative ignorance of the writers about concurrent thinking. Another feature was a relative absence of critical attitude in dealing with the different issues.
- Contributors mostly belonged to the community of distance educators in the universities. The published work was comparatively much less. This resulted in lack of incisive, comparative and analytic treatment of a vis-à-vis formal education and lacked of depth and insight into the whole issue from the academic angle.
- Distance learners, their problems, characteristics, learning styles, dropout and completion rates, evaluation and assessment and overall satisfaction from distance learning programmes had not gained the attention of Indian writers.

This clearly indicated that the target groups for whom distance education programmes were offered and their subsequent satisfaction from these programmes were never considered factors of importance.

- The fields of vocational and professional education remained outside the purview of writers. The academic fraternity in India largely upheld that distance education was an unsuitable medium for technical, vocational, professional and recurrent education.
- Research efforts remained fragmentary and isolated. Researches on distance education were very few in number. From the points of theoretical value and technical designs, the studies lacked rigour.

Summing up the state of the art, the authors commented "the Indian contributions to distance education fall short of the expected standard to give a new direction and vitality to distance education". They hoped that the future would witness more significant and constructive contributions, both theoretical and empirical, from the Indian distance educators and experts to give a new lease of life to distance education, thereby enabling the nation to benefit from this channel of education and solve some of its gigantic problems.

In 1998 the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration, New Delhi, organized a workshop on Research in Distance Education and Educational Technology with the following objectives:

- to review the status and trends of research in distance education and educational technology
- to identify problems, and priority areas for research in planning and management of distance education and educational technology.
- to prepare research proposals on identified research problems, and
- to develop a network of effort of research support to planning and management of distance education and educational technology.

Sujatha (1998) in her presentation to the workshop classified the research works of the decade 1976-86 into nine areas and commented on them the following way:

- Form the point of view of methodological aspects, most of the studies were descriptive highlighting the status and functioning of the system, exploring facts and figures related to its different dimensions.
- Except a few exploratory studies, most of the studies on distance education were evaluative in nature.
- Most of the evaluative studies were piecemeal in form and did not take into account the context of the functioning of the system.
- The research studies pointed that the instructional materials supplied to the students were designed mostly in an unscientific way and presented in an easy type manner, thus lacking pedagogy of self-learning.

She concluded that studies are "too few, too dispersed and yet too inadequate to derive proper feedback for planning and management of the system on a scientific basis".

Sahoo (1992) classified the studies into nine broad categories and on the basis of his review suggested the following areas for large scale research:

- Development of courses on the basis of appropriate planning and need assessment.
- Formulation of appropriate strategies of instruction of different courses.
- Utilization of technology in distance education.
- Economics of distance education.
- All issues concerning the open school system and Open University system.
- Structure and style of management of distance education.

Panda (1992) attempted an analysis of 142 research studies under 9 areas, dividing each area into two sub-categories of correspondence education and Open University education. He suggested the following broad areas for urgent attention of researchers.

- Curriculum planning and development
- Different ways , models of developing courses, multimedia packages and testing the instructional components of these packages for wide implementation
- Instructional design, development and implementation
- Activities and experiences of distance learners
- Development of model of coordination, information dissemination and exchange and quality control within the process of distance education activities

- Development of models of planning and management, organization and financial decision making separately for different types of institutions

Murali Manohar, Sudhakar and Rajendr Prasad (1996) conducted a bibliographic study covering 1176 works on distance education in India available during the previous three decades. The works included Government Reports, University Publicity Materials, etc. The authors classified the works under 15 leads. They found that seventy five percent of the works were descriptive and informative and only twelve percent were empirical.

The main observation made by the reviewers was the minor dimensions of the distance education system were studied neglecting the major aspects of the system. They pointed that there were hardly any theoretical or conceptual developments in field and no proper lessons could be learnt from the practice and formulations based on empirical realities. They concluded that there is hardly any serious study in India that would be able to stand as a testimony to create confidence in the system.

Finally the reviewers called for (a) through review of research already done, (b) identification of thrust areas for future research. Documentation and library services, (c) creation of research and evaluation cells in all CCIs/OUs, (d) coordination at the national level between UGC, IGNOU (DEC & STRIDE), ICSSR, NIEPA and other promoting and funding agencies, and (e) formulation of a national research policy on distance education in India.

The status of research activity in distance education in Andhra Pradesh was reviewed by Sesharatnam (1996). Her observations are still valid. She felt that:

- Research efforts have been fragmentary and isolated, from the point of view of theoretical value and design. The research activity leaves much to be desired
- Most of the studies conducted so far are a few and are descriptive in nature highlighting the status and functioning of the system with the facts and figures and
- Maintaining quality in spread of distance education does not seem to be concern of distance educators.

Panda, Satyanarayana and Sharma (1996) in their pioneering work 'Open and Distance Education Research: Analysis and Annotation' reviewed quite a sizeable number of studies on open and distance education in India. They analyzed over 152 studies and annotated 88 studies of them. The studies covered included some published and some unpublished, some institutionally sponsored and some individually undertaken, some projects and some dissertations at universities, open universities and open schools. They analyzed studies under nine sub-themes and also listed in the references almost all the research studies considered on Indian distance education. Analyzing the studies, the authors expressed three concerns:

- The first concern is with regard to the 'comprehensiveness' of most of the studies i.e., barring a few studies, there is lack of compatibility between the macro and micro issues and lack of a proper theoretical base to back them up.

- The second concern is with regard to the 'methodology' of research. Only a few studies are methodologically sound and most of the studies are either descriptive states surveys or experimental studies with poor methodological procedures.
- The third concern is with regard the 'coverage' of the research problems selected by the researchers. "Only a few studies could be considered holistic, appropriate, and generalizable. Investigating a problem for the sake of either conducting a study in the area of distance education or getting a degree has no meaning whatsoever". Even research studies conducted in distance education from 1992 to 1994 have neither changed characterization of the issues raised above nor significantly contributed to the quality of research.

Pushpa Ramakrishna and Prasad (1999) identified following thrust areas for research in distance education:

- Philosophy and concepts
- History of Distance Education
- Aims/Goals/ Mission of intuitions
- Programme Planning and Curriculum Design
- Development of Learning Materials (Print and Nonprint)
- Teaching and Learning Processes
- Student Support Services and Delivery Systems
- Student Evaluation (Formative and Summative) System Programme Evaluation (Formative and Summative)
- Economics of Distance Education
- Media in Distance Education
- Management of the system
- Application of New Technologies
- Open Education Network, National and International
- Quality Assurance
- Research Methodologies in Distance Education
- Staff Training and Development

Mishra (2002) analyzed the first 10 volumes of Indian Journal of Open Learning and concluded that several gaps exist in the research literature. He particularly pointed out the areas of design and development of self learning materials. Lokesh Kaul (2006) after briefly reviewing research studies conducted in the last four decades concluded that the trend of research on distance education informs of its quality and depth has not been encouraging. His analysis of research studies revealed the following:

- The research studies did not show any qualitative trend with respect to theory and practice of distance education.
- The Specific causes of huge enrolment or dropout in different courses/ among various categories of distance learners have not been studied in any of the researches.
- Research studies have mostly adopted descriptive survey approach and quantitative analysis/ techniques.
- Impact and intervention studies and evaluation of distance education system have been ignored.
- The teachers associated with distance education courses in conventional universities are hardly provided any orientation in the theory and practice of distance education programmes.
- While analyzing various issues and problems of distance education the researches have used the research processes and techniques as practiced in conventional system. Distance education research has major problems which are quite different from the research of conventional system.

Lokesh Koul (2006) strongly felt that research must be able to:

- Generate knowledge on various components of distance education; theory and its relevance with respect to different dimensions of Indian society, process and product, and cost effectiveness
- Help practitioners in the distance education system to encapsulate their experiences for the benefit of the system and future researchers
- Identify the underlying issues of learner characteristics and needs
- Study the influence of media upon the instructional system
- Focus on the issue of equity of access to interactive delivery systems
- Identify the roles of teachers, counsellors/facilitators and students in the distance education process
- Contribute to the emergence of distance education as a discipline
- Strengthen the morale of the distance education community in the country and help attract talent to this emerging area, and
- Providing results of empirical researches with regard to the potential of distance education to ensure high quality and relevant education to a large number of needy learners at a reasonable cost.

To achieve these objectives he suggested that IGNOU and UGC at the tertiary level, NOIS and NCERT at the school level may undertake the responsibility of commissioning and assisting research projects jointly so that the two systems formal/conventional and the distance/open could come together.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

Rekkedal in his richly documented essay Research in Distance Education pointed to some challenges for the future of distance education research and to some possible recommendations and actions:

- Distance education needs different kinds of research. As an applied professional field, it needs both basic research which tests and develops knowledge to guide practice and it needs research to solve practical problems
- Cooperation on research might give better results than individual based projects
- Integration of research philosophies, methods and designs would benefit the development of theory and practice in distance education
- Professionals and managers in distance education need to have some training in research methods, statistics and basic problems concerned with generalizations, validity and reliability of results from empirical research.
- There is a large need for research on how different students learn with different kinds of technology in different types of programmes. Research should be driven by educational theory rather than by the general enthusiasm of working with technology.
- There is need to develop a consistent conceptual frame work for research in distance education.
- ICDE should promote research based on cooperation between institutions and organizations in different countries.

These recommendations hold good for Indian situation too.

Moore listed several areas of research for distance educators and institutions on the basis of the proceedings of the Distance Education Research Symposium: A Research Agenda. The research areas identified are:

- Research on policy and administration
- Research on instruction
- Research on course design
- Research on learners and learning

The suggested research agenda is applicable to Indian distance education field also.

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