



The Social Basis of Distance Education: Strategies for Inclusive Growth

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ABSTRACT :

Education plays very crucial role in the developmental process of any country more so in a developing country like India, which is aiming to make education accessible to all its citizens by different modes. Education is perceived as an instrument for emancipation, empowerment, enlightenment and aims to bring overall social change. Provision of education through open and distance learning (ODL) system assumed great significance in this direction. The present Paper is an attempt to understand the social base of ODL system in India and suggest practical strategies to broaden its social base for inclusive growth and make it more accessible to the disadvantaged sections of the Indian society like Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), women and rural learners.

1. INTRODUCTION :

Education is always considered as a transformative force in the hands of the people who have access to it. Its basic aim is to liberate the mind of the human beings and make them to think with scientific bent of mind. Since Independence, India has taken many steps to democratize the educational opportunities by establishing many educational institutions at the primary, secondary and higher educational level. Expansion of educational network is an ample testimony to this process. As a part of this process Indian Government decided to establish a national institution for open distance education, in the form of Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in 1985 to offer academic programmes and to maintain standards in open distance education system in India. With in a short span of 23 years it could able to offer more than 160 academic programmes through its network of regional centres and study centres in the country.

The enrollment has exponentially increased since its establishment. IGNOU has drawn the attention of the national policy planners and the recognition from the international bodies. Now it is a mega university and world's largest open university. The distance education system is not only flexible but also aims to reach the people hither to unreached and specially the disadvantaged sections of the society. There is no doubt that education is the key to development and empowerment of the people. In the words of Indira Gandhi "education is a liberating force, cutting across the barriers of caste and class, smoothing out the inequalities imposed by birth and other circumstances". Education always perceived as an instrument for empowerment of the people in general and disadvantaged sections in particular.

Professor Ram Reddy (1998), the founding Vice-Chancellor of IGNOU, and of Andhra Pradesh Open University which was later re-named as Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University, and who is regarded as the

father of Indian Distance Education system, while writing a forward to a book on distance education expressed the opinion that it is a silent revolution taking place in a conservative world of education. One can understand Prof. Reddy's foresight and potential of distance education for a country like India, which is committed to the democratic way of life. Prof. Reddy felt that "elitism in education and democracy in politics do not go together. For political institutions in the country there is no alternative but to democratise the higher and social education with a view to provide access to higher education for any one who is interested in it".

The distance education system has emerged as an effective mode of education by providing educational opportunities for life long learning in wide range of faculties. Initially it offered programmes in liberal humanities and social sciences. As the time and technology progressed it has started offering programmes in the professional areas like management, computers and information sciences, nursing and health sciences. It has been playing a very critical role in higher education by providing educational programmes for the working people who want to upgrade their skills and knowledge. It used print as the main medium of instruction in the beginning and presently it is utilizing all the available multi media methods and information communication technologies for the delivery of the academic programmes and providing support services to the distance learners.

The distance education system has grown from leaps and bounds during the last four decades. In 1982 the first single mode open university was established in the country in the state of Andhra Pradesh. Within a short span of twenty-five years India became the home for one national open university and thirteen state open universities. In addition to them more than hundred dual mode conventional universities offering academic programmes through distance mode with many more private institutes offering different academic, professional and training programmes. The distance education system has emerged as a major

system of education with 1,729,000 enrolling during 2003-04 in the ODL system. It has seen a continuous and sustained growth in student enrolment.

2. OBJECTIVES :

At the outset it is aimed to understand the social base of Indian distance education system with special focus on disadvantaged sections of the society. It make an attempt to understand the social base of select Indian Open Universities, IGNOU over a decade between 1986-87 to 1996-97 and enrollment patterns for five years from 1995 to 1999. It also focused on student enrollment of 2004. It also makes an attempt to understand the social base of fresh admission students at Hyderabad Regional Centre for four years (2004 to 2007). At the end, the paper aims to suggest some practical strategies to enhance the social base of disadvantaged to more equitable levels of acceptance, so that inclusive growth can be achieved.

2.1 Social Basis of ODL in India :

The response of different social groups for taking advantage of distance education programmes provide opportunity to understand how far distance education system is catering to the needs of the different social groups in the society. Though the available data and literature is very limited but it could able to provide a birds eye view about the social base of distance education system in the country.

The data given in the TABLE 1 are based on Distance Education Council (2004) publication "Information Base on Distance Higher Education in India". It provided some vital details about the social base of Indian distance education system. The data is pertains to the year 2003-04 of the open universities in the country. Majority of the open universities are serving the urban, male from the general category and they are taking advantage in comparison to the rural, female and disadvantaged groups from the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.

TABLE 1 : Enrolment Pattern in Indian Open Universities

University	Total Enrolment	Gender		Place of Residence		Social Status				
		Male	Female	Urban	Rural	Gen.	SC	ST	OBC	PH
IGNOU New Delhi	197975	123993 (62.63)	73982 (37.36)	NA	NA	152710 (77.13)	13387 (6.76)	10288 (5.19)	3168 (1.60)	18422 (9.30)
Dr.BRAOU Hyderabad	190230	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
VMOU Kota	5999	4585 (76.42)	1414 (23.57)	0	0	4991 (83.19)	635 (10.58)	373 (6.21)	0	0
NOU Patna	1805	1368 (75.78)	437 (24.21)	705 (39.28)	996 (52.28)	868 (48.08)	157 (8.69)	57 (3.15)	700 (38.78)	0
YCMOU Nashik	102642	68746 (66.97)	33896 (33.02)	54360 (52.96)	48282 (47.03)	57728 (56.24)	15273 (14.87)	4671 (4.55)	24970 (24.32)	0
MPBOU Bhopal	192230	115401 (60.03)	76829 (39.96)	81520 (42.40)	110710 (57.59)	92922 (48.33)	22804 (11.86)	18959 (9.86)	57531 (29.92)	14 (0.07)
Dr.BAOU Ahmedabad	13824	9356 (67.67)	4468 (32.32)	7026 (50.82)	6798 (49.17)	7678 (55.54)	1709 (12.36)	771 (5.57)	3666 (26.51)	0
KSOU Mysore	33172	15871 (47.84)	17301 (52.15)	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
NSOU Kolkata	25244	18640 (73.83)	6604 (26.16)	17781 (70.43)	7463 (29.56)	21578 (85.47)	2966 (11.74)	700 (2.77)	0	0
UPRTOU Allahabad	8025	5815 (72.46)	2210 (27.53)	4633 (57.73)	3392 (42.26)	4385 (56.64)	878 (10.94)	3 (0.03)	2759 (34.38)	0
TNOU Chennai	9361	5729 (61.20)	3632 (38.79)	4701 (30.21)	4660 (49.78)	1279 (13.85)	1297 (13.85)	61 (0.065)	6719 (71.77)	5 (0.05)
Total	780507	369504 (47.34)	220773 (28.28)	170726 (21.87)	182301 (23.35)	344139 (44.09)	59106 (7.57)	35883 (4.59)	99513 (12.74)	18441 (2.36)

drawn from IGNOU 2004

TABLE 2 : IGNOU Student Enrolment (%) from 1986-87 to 1996-97

Year	Gender		Place of Residence			Social Status			
	Male	Female	Urban	Rural	Tribal	Gen.	SC	ST	PH
1986-87	93.5	6.5	NA	NA	NA	98.98	0.53	0.49	NA
1987-88	88.0	12.0	NA	NA	NA	90.75	7.53	1.72	NA
1988-89	76.9	23.1	NA	NA	NA	88.36	8.64	3.00	NA
1989-90	77.3	22.7	NA	NA	NA	86.45	7.52	3.03	NA
1990-91	80.3	19.7	NA	NA	NA	90.52	6.78	2.70	NA
1991-92	73.05	26.95	NA	NA	NA	90.10	5.25	2.65	NA
1992-93	73.7	26.3	79.1	20.9	NA	91.70	5.20	3.10	NA
1993-94	77.5	22.5	77.0	23.0	NA	93.0	4.70	2.30	NA
1994-95	77.5	22.5	77.0	23.0	NA	93.0	4.70	2.30	NA
1995-96	78.0	22.0	91.23	8.32	0.45	95.55	3.88	1.57	0.51
1996-97	77.18	22.82	83.52	16.05	0.43	92.99	4.32	1.69	1.00

drawn from IGNOU annual reports

2.2 Social Basis of IGNOU :

Social base of IGNOU for the initial ten years compiled from the annual reports is given in the table - 2. The data forces one to believe that social base of IGNOU is pre dominantly male, urban oriented and participation of the disadvantaged sections like SC, ST and women are less during the first decade.

The data given in the TABLE 3 is based on the study undertaken by Vijayshri and Garg (2000), who studied the trends of student enrolment in terms of gender, social status, rural, urban and employment status for five years from 1995 to 1999, provides an opportunity to understand the social base of distance education students in Indira Gandhi National Open University.

It is evident the students basically belong to urban areas and are male, from the general categories when compared to the female, rural and disadvantaged groups from the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes during the five years of study for which the authors have provided the data.

From these the fresh admission data of 2004, given in TABLE 4, it can be said that the IGNOU is to a large extent catering to the male and general candidates when compared to the female and disadvantaged groups from the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.

TABLE 3 : IGNOU Student Enrolment (%) 1995 to 1999

Variables	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Gender					
Male	77.75	77.98	77.18	71.52	73.53
Female	22.25	22.05	22.82	28.48	26.47
Social Status					
SC	4.16	3.88	4.32	NA	3.14
ST	2.12	1.57	1.69	NA	1.46
General	93.72	94.55	92.99	NA	95.30
Place of Residence					
Rural	18.81	8.77	16.48	17.89	22.40
Urban	81.19	91.23	83.52	82.11	77.60
Employment Status					
Employed	61.52	57.00	67.54	NA	NA
Unemployed	38.48	43.00	32.46	NA	NA

drawn from Vijayshri & Garg 2000

TABLE 4 : IGNOU Student Enrolment in 2004

S. No.	Types of Programmes	Total	Gender		Social Status				
			Male	Female	General	SC	ST	OBC	PH
<i>I. Postgraduate Programmes</i>									
1.	Professional/ Technical	36380	25359 (69.7)	11021 (30.29)	28181 (77.46)	2079 (5.71)	1189 (3.26)	3168 (8.7)	1763 (4.84)
2.	General	15196	6838 (44.90)	8358 (55)	13204 (86.89)	848 (5.58)	988 (6.5)	0	159 (1.04)
<i>II. Undergraduate Programmes</i>									
1.	Professional/ Technical	31680	20314 (64.12)	11366 (35.87)	22503 (71.03)	2033 (6.41)	1106 (3.39)	0	8038 (25.87)
2.	General	62172	43700 (70.28)	18472 (29.71)	49971 (80.37)	5353 (8.6)	4237 (6.81)	0	2611 (4.19)
III.	Diploma Programme	16435	8267 (50.3)	8162 (49.66)	13415 (81.61)	761 (4.63)	394 (2.39)	0	1865 (11.34)
IV.	Certificate Programme	36064	19483 (54.02)	16581 (45.97)	25403 (70.43)	2314 (6.41)	2373 (6.57)	0	5974 (16.56)
V.	Other Programmes	48	32 (66.66)	16 (33.33)	33 (68.74)	2 (4.16)	1 (2.08)	0	12 (24.99)
Total		197975	123993 (62.63)	73982 (37.36)	152710 (77.13)	13387 (6.76)	10288 (5.19)	3168 (1.60)	18422 (9.30)

drawn from IGNOU 2004

2.3 Social Basis of Regional Centre :

Coming to the regional level admission patterns at Hyderabad Regional Centre, given in the TABLE 5, the fresh admission data for four years (2004 to 2007) also substantiating the prevailing trends that the social base of distance education students of IGNOU is basically drawn from urban areas, largely belongs to general category and male when compared to rural areas, female and disadvantaged groups from the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.

Subsequently IGNOU came out with a special study centres scheme and established many special centres for the disadvantaged sections of the society. How far these centres are able to broaden the social base is an issue for introspection.

2.5 Supporting Studies:

There are only a few studies which support the inclusive growth in distance education. Prasanna Kumar (1994) argued that because of the inherent characteristics

TABLE 5 : Fresh Student Enrolment at IGNOU Regional Centre, Hyderabad

Year	Total Enrolment (Fresh)	Gender		Place of Residence			Social Status				
		Male	Female	Urban	Rural	Tribal	Gen.	OBC	SC	ST	PH
2004	3726	2471 (66)	1255 (34)	2970 (80)	756 (20)	NA	3140 (84)	NA	190 (5)	63 (2)	333 (9)
2005	4254	2682 (63)	1572 (37)	3409 (80)	845 (20)	NA	3837 (90)	NA	169 (3)	192 (5)	56 (2)
2006	6461	3918 (61)	2543 (39)	4709 (73)	1715 (27)	73 (1)	5020 (77.6)	909 (14)	415 (6)	88 (1)	29 (0.4)
2007	7366	4733 (64)	2633 (36)	5323 (72)	1970 (27)	73 (1)	4927 (67)	1370 (19)	693 (9)	252 (3)	124 (2)

drawn from IGNOU Regional Centre, Hyderabad

Based on the above data, it can be inferred that the social base of Indian open universities as well as IGNOU are largely in favour of students from urban areas, male and who belong to general categories when compared to their counterparts.

2.4 Efforts for Inclusive Social Basis :

IGNOU has been making consistent efforts to widen the social base and initiated steps to attract more students from the disadvantaged groups. As a part of the drive IGNOU (1998) has constituted a Special Task Force on Disadvantaged and started establishing special study centres for the groups in the backward districts of the country. The Task Force has identified SC/ST as the special targeted groups and suggested to modify the existing study centre scheme to suit to the needs of the disadvantaged groups and offer need based programmes especially for these groups.

of distance education system it is more suitable form of education for bringing social change of disadvantaged groups through distance education by closely collaborating with different governmental agencies which are working for upliftment of tribals by establishing “outreach centres”. Negi (1999) suggested that the participation of the disadvantaged groups can be increased by establishing more study centres in the rural and tribal areas, designing programmes as per the local needs and creating awareness about open distance learning programmes through use of media in the rural areas.

Raja Rao (1999) study based on the IGNOU Annual Reports of 1986-87 to 1996-97 (table-2) found that majority of the students taking admission in IGNOU are from general category, male and from urban areas and expressed optimism that with the launching of special study centers scheme

the participation from these groups may increase in due course of time. Vijayshri and Garg (2000) suggested for not only designing of “need based innovative courses” but also extending “effective support after enrolment” to the disadvantaged.

Despite the fact that the available data suggest that the social basis is skewed, there is no doubt that distance education provided educational opportunities to many disadvantaged students who are otherwise deprived of the chance to improve their educational qualifications and skills.

3. STRATEGIES FOR INCLUSIVE GROWTH :

There is a need to adopt multi-pronged strategies to widen the social base of distance education system in general and IGNOU in particular to achieve acceptable levels of inclusive growth. The following are some suggestions in that direction.

(a) Scholarships :

In conventional education, post metric scholarships provide opportunities to disadvantaged sections of SC/ST and lower income groups to continue their studies. These are aimed at meeting student boarding expenses. The learners of ODL are aged and some of them are employed. Now many younger age groups are being attracted to the ODL system for education. Hence if the post metric scholarships are extended to the needy ODL students, it will be a boon to the disadvantaged groups.

(b) Special Education Fund :

ODL institutions get large response for some popular academic programmes. As a policy it is suggested to provide fee concessions or reimbursement of fees to the deserving individuals from the disadvantaged sections. It will facilitate their joining. There is a need to create a special education fund in the ODL institutions for this purpose. By inviting applicants, the deserving can be provided the fee concessions, free ships and reimbursement of fees from the fund.

(c) Collaboration and Networking :

IGNOU has less study centres in the rural areas. By collaborating and networking with the local institutions, NGOs, government departments and societies, who are actively engaged in the upliftment of the disadvantaged sections, it can attract more learners to its fold. This needs to be explored. Exclusive information centres need to be established to popularize and disseminate the information in the remote and rural areas of the districts.

(d) Special Study Centres :

The scheme of special study centres need to be pursued more aggressively so that different organizations can be brought in to IGNOU's fold to offer educational programmes. Special study centres need to be established in the districts and constituencies where considerable population of SC/ST and Minorities are in majority in collaboration with the local organizations. Special publicity needs to be given to popularize this scheme.

(e) Area Specific Enrollment Drive :

Some IGNOU academic programmes are targeted at special groups and some times to special targeted areas. By especially identifying those programmes and groups and encouraging them to enroll, inclusive growth can be achieved. Fee concessions can be extended to the special category groups.

(f) Utilising Regional Languages :

IGNOU is known for its quality self-instructional course materials. By translating the same in to the regional languages IGNOU can attract more students, who are quality conscious and are from the rural areas, who are otherwise not taking admission because of medium.

(g) Convergence with Conventional Education System :

Many of the IGNOU certificate programmes can be studied by conventional students simultaneously while doing their regular programmes. But many are not aware of it. By popularizing this we can get more students to some of the certificate

programmes. Free mobility of students between the two streams gives more flexibility to the learners.

(h) Hostel Facility :

In Andhra Pradesh Social Welfare Department runs lot of hostels for the conventional students. Such hostel facilities are not open for the ODL students assuming that they are not regular and they are adults and employed. If hostel facilities are extended, many may prefer to join the ODL system. Hostel facilities encourage the students to go for productive work during the weekdays and to the counseling sessions on weekends.

(i) Mobile Counselling :

As the study centres spread is limited to major towns and district headquarters, mobile counseling may be the best option to provide counseling services to the remote and rural students and women. To make it more effective, meticulous planning and prior intimation to the learners and arranging of experienced and willing counselors are pre-requisite.

(j) Use of ICTs for Support :

ODL institutions use multi-media to teach and reach the learners. Provision and proper maintenance of the ICT equipment at the centres need to be ensured for effective utilization of audio and video programmes. Wide publicity to the existing facilities guarantees the use of infrastructure. Use of Radio, TV, Gyan Darshan TV and Gyan Vani FM Radio for learner support will help to popularize IGNOU programmes and to get more learners from the rural areas.

(k) Distance Learning Facilitators :

A distance learning facilitator could provide individual support to the low enrollment programmes. If the scheme is effectively utilized to popularise programmes and for sale of forms by identifying more and more people from remote places, it will help to reach more people. Incentive based payment for the number of forms sold and admissions completed will motivate the committed individuals to become facilitators.

(l) Remedial Courses in English :

We often hear from the students of ODL that the English language content of the material is difficult to understand. Organizing remedial courses in English language for the students of rural areas is the common practice even in central universities. These classes will give confidence to the rural learners and aims to equip them with language skills of a convent educated urban student. If such courses and counseling sessions are provided in ODL it will help the student to complete the programmes of study and reduce the dropouts.

(m) Enhancing Study Skills :

Many of the ODL students are dropouts of the conventional system or who missed the opportunity to get educated when they are young. When they came to ODL system after a long gape, they find it difficult to cope up with the studies. Many did not have reading skills and writing skills. If proper care is taken to enhance the study skills of the disadvantaged we can aim for inclusive growth.

(n) Pro-Active Administration :

ODL system is very much dependent on administration. Administration plays very vital role in delivery of academic programmes and in extending support services. Learner centered and pro-active administration is prerequisite for encouraging and attracting the learners to the ODL system. Otherwise impersonal administration will create more hurdles to the students than providing solutions. Pro-active administrative system will ensure the participation of the disadvantage sections through its innovative policies and practices.

4. DISCUSSION :

The issues of access and equity are important and certainly very vital for achieving inclusive growth and widening the social basis of the open and distance learning system of education. Pro-active policies and more innovative strategies are

the need of the hour to attract the eligible learners to different academic programmes of the ODL institutions, who are other wise outside the ODL system.

Institutions need to do continuous self evaluation, regular review and refinement of strategies will help to widen the social base and facilitate inclusive growth and equal participation by different groups of stake holders in open and distance education system.

5. CONCLUSION :

ODL institutions need to follow multi-pronged strategies for achieving inclusive growth. The efforts of IGNOU have started yielding good results. According to the IGNOU Vice-Chancellor's 19th Convocation Report (2008), it has enrolled 35% women learners and 25% SC and ST learners during 2007 – 08 admissions. Thus IGNOU has crossed the national average of 33% women and 22.5% of SC and ST enrolled in different higher educations programmes of IGNOU. If the present trend continues, the objective of reaching the unreached and the disadvantaged can be easily met.

The strategies suggested in this paper will never limit a creative mind and pro-active administrative system of open and distance learning institutions, but will contribute in a limited way for achieving inclusive growth.

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