

The Notion of ‘Openness’ in Indian ODL Systems

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Abstract: In the field of Indian higher education, increasing the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) has been identified as a big challenge by the National Knowledge Commission (NKC). While reflecting on the Indian ODL systems, run mainly through the Open Universities and Dual mode institutions, the principles nurturing this system and the question of ‘quality assurance’ should be considered the main thrust areas. At the same time, the notion of ‘openness’ should also be taken into serious consideration as it reflects the difficulties in the knowledge-dissemination processes in institutions of higher education in India. Since, ODL in India is yet to fulfil the expectation of the people, compared to European and other South East Asian countries, it is high time we sought out some clarity with regard to the assumptions of ‘openness’ because without clarity, the problems of quality and equity will always haunt this mode. This paper is based on the observations and understanding that the idea of ‘openness’ should be the sole motivating factor for all those concerned with creating a meaningful teaching-learning environment through the ODL mode of education in India.

Introduction:

In Indian Higher Education, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has received unprecedented response from the concerned authorities in recent times. The National Knowledge Commission (NKC) also recommended for the establishment of 1500 new universities in India by 2015 as against the existing 640 universities. People are encouraged to find that such a move will help in increasing the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) to 15% by the year 2015 and 30% by the year 2020. However, an experience of the challenges as well as the on-going transitions in the Indian higher education sector informs that the explanations of ODL have to be expanded to include much more than academic arrangements that are likely to enable people to learn at the time, place, and pace of their own choice. The conventional idea of ‘open’ education refers to a system of learning made available at a place and time of the learner’s own choice. Against this notion, another possible definition of ‘open’ education may be that it is a system that does not operate through conventions which are essentially restrictive in nature, and the restrictions being related to admissions, candidature for examinations, time to be devoted to a course, number of examinations taken in a year and so on. But, it is also to be noted that the larger the number of such restrictions left unaddressed and unresolved, the higher the need of the discussion of ‘openness’ of the type of education under consideration. At the same time, we must clarify that ‘correspondence’/distance education institutes may or may not be ‘open’ in the sense we have mentioned above, or may be ‘open’ only to a limited degree; and that even a traditional college/university may remain ‘open’ to a noticeable extent by incorporating the philosophy of open education into its rubric. This has finally set the norms for the national debate on open education in many parts of India, including the North East. In today’s educational and cultural contexts, the meaning of ‘openness’ itself must be redefined so as to address issues instructionally more valid and pedagogically more relevant. My attempt in this paper is to deliberate on two important aspects of ‘openness’ – ‘Openness’ as an institutional response’ and ‘Openness as a pedagogic response’—which can constitute certain integral aspects of the teaching-learning processes in the ODL mode of education currently existing in a country like India.

Open and Distance Learning in India

In the second decade of the 21st century, ODL in India is no longer a novel practice as we all seem

to have experienced the increasing popularity of this system because of its viability and feasibility. At the same time, it is not an exaggeration to that open and distance learning is the only possible solution to the problem of exclusion in education. However, the genesis of this system in India can be traced in a variety of systematic approaches adopted by the policy makers of the Indian higher education to impart education through the ODL mode. While the earliest transformations were taking shape, ODL was only a poor duplication of what had already been in place for the more privileged sections of society in the form of conventional face-to-face education. This is clearly visible when one conducts a study on the syllabuses of the various programmes that were being taught in various ODL institutes in different parts of India. For example, a look at the course contents of the Institute of Distance and Open Learning (IDOL) of Gauhati University, Assam makes it clear that the ODL mode was used just as a secondary degree-awarding and parallel system of 'correspondence' courses.

The Kothari Committee of 1961, for the first time, recommended for education through correspondence courses in India. Subsequently, the University of Delhi, in 1962, established the first school of correspondence courses and continuing education in India. The Punjabi University, Patiala was the second Indian University to set up a full-fledged directorate of correspondence course in 1968. But the idea of an 'open university' in India was the result of a suggestion by the Planning Commission Committee in 1969. Subsequently, the establishment of the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in 1985 drastically changed the educational scenario of India by offering many avenues of education through the distance mode. In 1986, the Indian Government adopted a National Policy on Education, which stressed education as a unique investment for the future. Gradually, the term 'open', which was used initially to convey a liberal attitude in terms of the admissibility of lower levels of academic performance, began to be used to mean, as stated by K. B. Power (2002), 'suggestions of the lessening or removal of restrictions of exclusions and of privilege, of demolishing or lowering established barriers between subject areas, of enlarging and enriching the areas of activity and experience graded as educational', and to symbolise a 'shift in the relationship between teacher and pupil towards that of student and adviser.' Significantly, in India, an open university or a dual mode provider started symbolising access and equity as well as the existence of a student-centred or student-friendly education system, which is mainly because it revolutionised Indian higher education by making it more accessible and less expensive.

By the end of 2015, India has got total 14 open universities—one national open university, and 13 state open universities; and around 150 dual mode universities/institutions. The Draft Report on the 11th Five Year plan clearly stated that ODL would emerge as a vibrant and dynamic component of higher education infrastructure of the country because it has provided access to quality education to about 25% of the total population of learners in the Indian Higher Education sector. The system has demonstrated high levels of cost efficiency, flexibility and innovative applications of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), and has created educational opportunities for the vast multitudes of learners left un-served by the formal education system. But this short history of ODL in India also indicates the national need to alleviate the rigours hardening the core of an educational system, which in reality had been handed down to us from the colonial times. Hence, the issue of 'openness' as a unique feature in the ODL institutes in general, should hold the centre stage of the policy makers of education in India.

'Openness' as an Institutional Response

In the present context, the ODL systems in India are run mainly through the open universities and the Directorates of Distance Education (DDE). Moreover, these systems function at par with the formal face-to-face system by simply compiling whatever can be included in printed form on the pages of Self Learning Materials (SLMs) or Self Instructional Materials (SIMs). Even the

designing of curriculum too ordinarily refers to the tried-and-tested pedagogic methods of traditional classroom teaching. Experience however reveals that such a practice consistently relegates the ODL curriculum to the lower slot in the repertory of courses offered. As part of the efforts to widen the scope of 'open' education, enrolments of more and more learners into the ODL system are allowed without any discipline-based bar like we can experience in case of IDOL, Gauhati University in a state like Assam. At present, only to a limited extent, does the course curriculum in ODL institutes not replicate that which has been a part of traditional programmes. As far as the common institutional dictates go, the ODL curricula are meant to remain 'open' with course-design and course-preparation that meet the specific academic requirements of the learners learning at a distance. To that extent, it can be argued that the brief history ODL in India contains the scope for adaptations to current needs. Given that the ODL system incorporates, at least for the time being, innovative strategies in teaching like the multimedia materials, it should evidently be capable of transmitting much more than what was used to be assumed in case of older curricula naturally handicapped by the lack of adequate resources. Consequently, the enrichment of the learning environments came to be seen as the most essential ingredients in the making of academic curricula.

There is no doubt about the fact that the possibilities for innovative strategies in the teaching-learning processes opened up by the ODL system has been richly reaped in the universities of the developed countries. Clearly therefore, in India too, there is a need to include the various processes of teaching-learning within the framework of institutional response, so that a new social landscape can unpack different valid areas in the academic transactions. As the burden of social responsibility stands as a distinct marker of the ODL system, at least for the time being, enjoining upon its educators to maintain practices that ideas of actual 'openness' with respect to teacher-student relationship has to be taken care of. So, a mainstay of any ODL institute is the importance it should ideally attach to improvement and continuous assessment of its learners as well as teachers through feedback arrangements. It does well for us to outline the logistical dimensions of ODL whose cost-effectiveness has finally supplied *the need* for 'open' systems of learning in the context of India. At the same time, as a widely perceived panacea for speedy educational growth, 'open' systems of learning present themselves with various opportunities to do research on the feasibility of the system as means to gain access to life-long learning for all those who wish to learn.

While considering the issue of 'openness' as an institutional response, we must examine that too much information and not enough knowledge should not cripple the actual incentives of the educational institutes. Thus, to foster the elements of 'openness', the academic centres have an important role to play to help students understand the requirements of the modern world. Modern educational technologies should be directed towards fostering meaningful interactivity among the stakeholders. The institution should help educators to see if proper learning experiences are recorded accordingly and distributed properly with the help of technology. Besides, they should be encouraged to produce Open Educational Resources (OERs) with the help of online tools and technologies. The 21st century learners do not generally separate their lives from their own studies while utilising technologies. Hence, institutional reforms should try to explore how the participants use and accept such innovations. In terms of administrative policies, to encourage 'openness', the state should withdraw all its rigid hold from the higher education centres. But in a country like India such withdrawal may cause many disastrous consequences. This matter is of utmost importance in a developing country like India where a large part of the population is still reeling under extreme poverty. According to United Nations Development Programme (2010), an estimated 37.2% of Indians live below the country's national poverty line. So, we do feel the need of an all-inclusive educational system.

There is no denying the fact that the faculties of human beings, the sets of human values and precepts have been expanded through the university education in India. Today's higher education institutes are set up for certain specific reasons and needs which may be social, political or even

pedagogical. Those who are raising cudgels against the ODL system would say that the educators lack accountability and that academic excellence is compromised at the alter of convenience. But an ODL institute is also very much a part of the society and needs to essentially remain 'open' in order to combat exclusiveness and accommodate a variety of experiences.

'Openness' as a Pedagogic Response

The United Nation's Millennium Development Goals Report (2010) rendered a great service by providing a renewed importance to education and developing viable educational models in the entire world. This Report is the outcome of international cooperation, inspiring developmental efforts that have improved the lives of millions of people around the world. So, naturally there also emerged debates and discussions on higher education in India as part of the model of development adopted by different state governments in India over the past few decades. Crores of rupees have been invested by the HRD ministry of India for uplifting the education sector in the 11th Five Year Plan. But while lot of discussion were going on for establishing developmental models as well as the feasibility of such models, the need for adequately trained faculties to teach the 'distant' learners enrolling in the ODL system also started drawing attention of all the stakeholders of Indian higher education. This also necessitated the reconsideration of the role to be played by the ODL faculties in a changing context of a globally competitive world. The conscious decision of Indian policy-makers to adopt this supernumerary system (especially in higher education) reveals the need for urging ODL educators towards a very special set of Indian goals. But, the irony is that the Indian conditions demand that the ODL system should deliver results more in terms of pushing up the GER as a primary objective in higher education than in terms of useful learning experience and exit behaviour. At the same time, the free-market economy has ironically, in an inverted perspective, also brought to view the urgent need to conceptualise the outlines of what can help in delivering 'openness', along with quality and equity. Of late, The Indian Government has displayed their willingness to turn such critical compulsions to advantage by turning the ODL mode of education into a richly potent and amenable system that can impart to students, besides formal education, various need-based skill developmental programmes those learning experiences which are almost impossible in the classroom-centric conventional mode of education.

Whereas the conventional academic mind-set of the educators often stresses the problems of eliminating the classroom teacher from the teaching-learning process, a significant part of the debate on 'openness' in ODL has to address the questions of how 'open' and how adequately responsive to the 'distant learner' these educators are. Perhaps, this is the indicator in which the important need to connect pedagogy with the idea of 'openness' can be located. The Indian situation seems to have rendered these questions as those of the greatest urgency because now such questions rest on references to certain criteria like—adequate infrastructure, well-qualified, experienced and trained faculty, standards of entry and exit, duration of studies for courses, curricular content and evaluation schemes, and the conventions of formal face-to-face education structured around the number of lectures, tutorials, and practical and so on. In recent times, these yardsticks have naturally been brought over from the older formal system in revised forms to safeguard course preparation and the quality of study materials, to structure the teaching-learning in the form of transactions involving feedback and learner-support services such as counselling, tutorials, and forms of interactivity.

As far as my experience goes, the ODL system in the present context, have to supplement these familiar yardsticks. But one could very well claim that there has already been a shift through reviewing the already established ideas like—socialisation, contact and 'visible involvement' in the teaching-learning processes, overemphasis on interaction, attention to exit behaviour over flexible entrance qualifications as well as closer attention being paid to the designing of curriculum and course materials, teacher-student interface, timely evaluation and feedback arrangements, among others. Badri N. Koul (2006) in his *Perspectives on Distance Education: Towards a Culture*

of *Quality* has discussed these issues in greater detail to question of standards in education that came up in relation to ODL during 1960s-1970s. However, the recommendations that he offered are significant even today.

The use of OERs and MOOCs has changed the contemporary ODL sector like never before. Use of OERs may emerge as the New Pedagogy that can entirely change our views regarding 'openness' of education and enhance the much talked about phenomenon called 'Open Knowledge Movement'. But, it has also been increasingly felt and realised that effective teaching-learning can never be replaced by the extensive induction of ICT aids into teaching because, the ODL mode works on the principle of need-based student-teacher interaction which further incurs the notion of 'openness' as a deviator from traditional face to face principles that does not grant strength of understanding or cultural knowledge to the learners. An ODL educator, who has to grant the value of 'prior knowledge' to the learners, then cannot assume the role of the pedantic guru, and must remain 'open'. Thus, the role of Self Learning Material (SLM) as the 'teacher in print' helps to create a learning environment in which the ODL educators themselves get an opportunity to re-assess themselves so that their knowledge-base can be updated to suit the emerging needs of the distance learners. Hence, an ODL educator needs to remain 'open' so that he/she can accommodate not only newer learning experiences but also newer attitudes towards the 'distant' learners.

Conclusion:

While continuing a debate on 'openness' in the Indian ODL system, one should not be calling for the autonomy of structure only, but that of thought and independent thinking, of freedom of expression. So, in a country like India, to foster the ideas of 'openness', education should guard the democratic space in the society which is increasingly subjugating people's dissent. At the same time, the policy of exclusivist higher education system, under the grips of the free market economy, must be abolished through the inclusion of many need-based skill developmental programmes. 'Openness' should be entrusted to the thought-process of every individual or intellectual who cannot stand aloof from the greater society to which he/she belongs. For quality assurance through the distance mode, the NKC recommended the constitution of an *External Quality Assurance Cell* to assess and evaluate the ODL institutions at regular interval. Even the former Distance Education Council, IGNOU, New Delhi also decided to have a *Centre for Internal Quality Assurance (CIQA)* in all open universities of the country. At the same time, the Commonwealth of Learning Review and Improvement Model (COL RIM) has initiated a fresh review system of the ODL institutes in India which can contribute a lot to our society by identifying all those areas in which an ODL institute needs improvements. State Open Universities like BRAOU, Hyderabad and KKHSOU, Guwahati have been able to reap the benefits of this approach. These are reformist moves which have helped in translating the idea of 'openness' into actionable goals with the adoption of a quality culture so that it can accommodate others' viewpoints in the discussion of an area which is expanding so visibly. Thus, the idea of 'openness' stem from practice and revise commonly held notions.

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