

ODL in North-East India: A Developmental Perspective

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Abstract

Connected with a 'Chicken's Neck' to the rest of the country, India's North East is a land of rich and diversified culture blessed with an abundance of rare species of flora and fauna. It can aptly be termed as a region of 'Unity in Diversity'. Over the years, the region has not been able to progress as it should and lies far behind in terms of economic development as compared to the rest of the country. The alarming rise in the level of unemployment due to the lack of skill based method of learning is certainly one of the reasons for the slow pace of development of the region. If 'education is the essence of human prosperity and progress', than right education can uplift an economy from the darkness of ignorance. It is here that the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system has turned out to be a boon for many and an alternative to the formal learning system in the contemporary world. It has not only enhanced the Gross Enrolment ratio (GER) but also has turned the region into a knowledge hub. Due to its easy accessibility, cost-effectiveness and flexibility, the system has been able to reach people living in far flung and isolated areas. Mizoram, one of the states in the North East corner of India, too has witnessed a significant growth in open and distance learning system both at the tertiary and at the school level since the late eighties. The rapid expansions in study centres, diversification of courses and in enrolment of learners, are an indication that ODL system in the North East has contributed in a significant manner towards enhancing its economic development in particular and in turn building a knowledgeable society in general. The inclusion of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in different DOL institutions has made learning much easier and comfortable than what it used to be previously. Collecting secondary data from different sources, this paper therefore is an attempt to understand and discuss the role of ODL system as a vehicle of development in North East India.

Key words: Economic development., gross enrolment ratio (GER), information and communications technology (ICT), open and distance learning (ODL)

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1.0 Introduction

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has come a long way in creating a knowledgeable society. It is characterised by a non-conformist and non-traditional approach which, in effect, questions existing norms of traditional education and seeks to provide a new orientation to educational processes. It assumes premises about the nature of learning that are vastly different from those governing the traditional system of education. Moreover, it has its own dialectic register which arises out of its endeavour to overcome the problems that are implicit in imparting instruction to students who are at a distance from the teacher and/or the institution. Distance education, in comparison with the conventional educational system, is a wider system in terms of both connotation and denotation. Its connotation is wider because it works in a much larger learning situation: a situation in which many factors remain indeterminate and inchoate. It has a wider denotation in that it covers a considerable distance in order to effect academic communication. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system has turned out to be an alternative to the formal learning system in the contemporary world. It has not only enhanced the Gross Enrolment ratio (GER) but also has turned the region into a knowledge hub. Due to its easy accessibility, cost-effectiveness and flexibility, the system has been able to reach people living in far flung and isolated areas such as the North Eastern part of India. India's North East is a land of rich and diversified culture blessed with an abundance of rare species of flora and fauna. Over the years, the region has not been able to progress as it should and lies far behind in terms of economic development as compared to the rest of the country. The alarming rise in the level of unemployment due to the lack of skill based method of learning is certainly one of the reasons for the slow pace of development of the region. According to the Census of India, 2001, with an overall literacy rate of 64.28 per cent, there is a wide gender range in terms of male and female literacy rates. The male literacy percentage being 75.26 per cent as against the female rate of 53.67 per cent respectively. But according to the Census of India, 2011, this gap has significantly minimised with the total literacy rate in India being 74.4 per cent where the male literacy percentage being 82.14 per cent and the female percentage is 65.46 per cent. It is a known fact that India's North East has been lagging far behind in terms of educational growth as compared to the rest of the country. Because of extreme poverty in few places of the region the people cannot make good investment on education. However, a few DOL institutions in Assam and other North Eastern states like the Institute of Distance and Open Learning

(IDOL) Gauhati University, Directorate of Distance Education (DDE), Dibrugarh University, Center for Distance Education (CDE), North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Institute of Distance Education (IDE), Rajiv Gandhi University, Arunachal Pradesh, Directorate of Distance Education (DDE), Sikkim Manipal University, Sikkim, Directorate of Distance Education (DDE), Tripura University, Center for Open and Distance Learning (CODL), Tezpur University and Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU), the first Open University in the North East in Guwahati has contributed in a significant manner towards the upliftment of the educational scenario of the region by providing flexible mode of learning to the learners. The only central Open University of the country, Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) has its Regional centers in all the North Eastern states thereby meeting the educational needs of the learners. They offer the advantage of tailoring programmes to local needs and state-based requirements by using approaches that will be most acceptable to workers in the given community. These colleges are a source of economic growth because they provide an educated and skilled workforce that improves the quality of life for individual students, communities, and the nation. IGNOU developed variety of community development programmes for non-literate and neo-literate rural disadvantaged section with emphasis on women and unemployed youth. Likewise, KKHSOU has significantly contributed by providing education to the inmates of different jails in Assam as well. Distance education has become one powerful medium of obtaining degrees for large number of students who are staying in far off and remote areas and for whom accessing universities on regular basis is still a dream.

The following Table 1 shows the level wise distribution of students in the distance mode.

Table 1 Level wise distribution of Distance enrolment

Level	Male	Female	Total
Ph.D.	22	8	30
Post Graduate	583346	623480	1206826
Under Graduate	1325626	1026796	2352422
PG Diploma	39812	24218	64030
Diploma	75846	33973	109819
Certificate	32525	46070	78595
Integrated	1	0	1
All	2057178	1754545	3811723

(Source: All India Survey on Higher Education 2014-2015)

Table 2 offers a comparison of enrolment in regular and distance mode of education in India in the year 2014-15. Thus, from Table 1 and Table 2, it has been observed that in response to the other levels, the most number of enrolments has happened in the Post Graduate and Under Graduate levels at the Distance mode in contrast to the Regular mode.

Table 2 Comparison between Regular and Distance Enrolment in University: 2014-2015

Level	Enrolment in regular mode	Enrolment in distance mode
Ph.D.	100762	30
M.Phil	18621	0
Post Graduate	693491	1206336
Under Graduate	1438090	2351899
PG Diploma	84248	63979
Diploma	173238	98676
Certificate	16980	52606
Integrated	88298	1
Total	2613728	3773527

(Source: *All India Survey on Higher Education 2014-2015*)

Table 3 offers another comparison of enrolment in regular and distance mode of education in India in the year 2015-16. Thus, from Table 3 it has been observed that in response to the other levels, the most number of enrolments has happened in the Post Graduate and Under Graduate levels at the Distance mode in contrast to the Regular mode.

Table 3 Comparison between Regular and Distance Enrolment in University: 2015-2016

Level	Enrolment in regular mode	Enrolment in distance mode
Ph.D.	109416	136
M.Phil	24878	0
Post Graduate	768640	1107925
Under Graduate	1599953	2498983
PG Diploma	90769	68604
Diploma	183717	94247
Certificate	15083	34021
Integrated	92823	1
Total	2885279	3803917

(Source: *All India Survey on Higher Education 2015-2016*)

2.0 Status of ODL in North East

Srivastava et.al. (2007), has stated that Open and Distance Learning (ODL), because of its flexibility and affordability has been a learner's delight. It has not only been able to bring the otherwise deprived and poverty oriented learners to the mainstream of education but also has provided quality education which is at par to the regular conventional mode. The ODL system has blossomed in North East with IGNOU being the first to open up its Regional center in the year 1987 to meet the academic needs of its people. Previously known as the Post Graduate Correspondence School, now renamed as Institute of Open and Distance Learning (IDOL), Gauhati University was established in the year 1998 with the objective to ensure the opportunity to pursue quality higher education to the large number of students who could not pursue higher education through conventional mode of education. Started in the year 2001, the Directorate of Distance Education (DDE), Dibrugarh University is committed to provide access to quality higher education to the people of the region who are deprived of higher education due to various reasons and to those who wish to upgrade or acquire knowledge through studies in various fields. The Centre for Distance Education, NEHU was established with an objective to provide courses to students who are desirous for further education through various modes of distance learning system. North–Eastern Hill University (NEHU) and Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI), New Delhi had signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on 1st December 2005 to collaborate in promoting education for the empowerment of the persons with disability. The Institute of Distance Education at Rajiv Gandhi University, Arunachal Pradesh aims to provide higher education opportunities to those who are unable to join regular academic and vocational education programmes in the affiliated colleges of the University and make higher education reach to the doorsteps in rural and geographically remote areas of Arunachal Pradesh in particular and North-eastern part of India in general. The Centre for Open and Distance Learning (CODL) of Tezpur University was established in the year 2011 with the aim of disseminating knowledge and imparting quality education through open and distance learning mode. The basic focus of the Centre is to prepare human resource of the region and the country by making them skilled and employable. Amongst all of them, Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU), the first open learning University in the North East established under the provision of the KKHSOU, Act' 2005 enacted by the Govt. of Assam. Tables 4 to 6 show the enrolment of students under KKHSOU during the recent years, while Table 7 shows

the enrolment of IGNOU in the North Eastern states of India during the year 2015-16.

Table 4 Enrolment during July-December 2014 (KKHSOU)

Names of Programmes	Enrollment of Learners
BPP First Semester	6685
Degree First Semester	20172
D.El.Ed First Semester	14073
Diploma	209
Certificate	125
PG Diploma First Semester	108
Master Degree First Semester	3643
Ph.D.	15
Total enrolmemnt	45030

Source: Horizon, KKHSOU, Vol-IX, No. 1, 2015

Table 5 Enrolment during the period July-December 2016 (undergraduate courses)

Name of Learners	Enrolment of Learners
BA	18999
BBA	39
BCA	211
B.Com	468
BMC	70
BPP	6076
All certificate programmes	301

Source: Horizon, KKHSOU Vol.XI, No.1, Jan 2017

Table 6 Enrolment during the period July-December 2016 (postgraduate courses)

Name of Learners	Enrolment of Learners
MA	3131
MBA	133
MCA	54
MMC	23
M.Sc. (IT)	70
MSW	253
PG Diploma (all)	224
Total	3888

Source: Horizon, Vol. XI, KKHSOU, No.1, Jan 2017

Table 7 State wise enrolment (2015-16) of IGNOU

Name of State	No. of students
Assam	8559
Arunachal Pradesh	6020
Manipur	3964
Meghalaya	5946
Mizoram	3278
Nagaland	2380
Sikkim	2451
Tripura	4025
Total	36623

Source: IGNOU Annual Report 2015-2016

Open Learning institutions and Universities such as these are striving to generate quality learning amongst the students of the region so as to make them self sufficient and thereby can contribute effectively towards the overall development of this region.

3.0 Literature Review

According to Das & Bordoloi (2012), the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has revolutionised the ODL mode of delivery by making the teaching-learning process much more flexible and interesting. Hinting further on the ICT enabled learning methods, the writers felt that ICT enabled ODL is a surrogate to the conventional mode of learning process as it has opened up wide avenues for the people in this area. With education being a Fundamental Right of the citizens of India as incorporated in the 86th amendment of the Constitution in the year 2002 and now that the Open and Distance Education system has started to spread its wings far across the North East as in other parts of the country, the eligible learners can now come forward to avail their Fundamental Right and thereby enlighten themselves which was otherwise a distant unfulfilled dream due to various reasons.

Mazumder (cited in Bhattacharyya, 2012) highlights that the ODL system of education is an inseparable part of the total educational system of the country as it covers a large number of people under its ambit. Although open learning, initially in the guise of correspondence learning, has been in existence for many years, there is relatively little in-depth analysis of its impact on and interrelations with other forms of learning. Moreover, considering the fact that education is a necessity for survival in this modern world, most nations had started to follow the concept of right to

education for all its people. Further, with the changing of time and in the age of globalisation, it has become imperative to meet the demand of knowledgeable yet skilful people and therefore all the countries have been laying importance of modern methods of learning. The writer had further stated that to meet the need of its learners the ODL institutions in North East and KKHSOU in particular have been adopting the modern technological mode of learning.

According to Lama (2012), to cater to the employability demand of the North east, more of skill based courses have to be incorporated into the curriculum. It is here that the need of vocational courses become imperative. It is noteworthy that in its approach paper, the Twelfth Five Year Plan had laid special emphasis on the essence of skill oriented mode of education. The author has further rightly hinted that there has been a 'step-motherly attitude' shown towards vocational education since inception as it finds no place in the formal school curriculum and if in any way employability is the prime objective then vocational courses are a necessity in the conventional educational curriculum. Encouraging Public Private Partnership (PPP) in this field, the Vocational Educational Training (VET) through distance mode can go a long way to cater to the needs of the people by providing the modern infrastructural facilities and well trained personnel.

Srivastava et.al. (2007), had depicted in his work that the education scenario in North East had got a major boost when the Government of India had established the North Eastern Regional Educational Council (NEREC) in the year 2005 to look into some of the specific issues of the overall educational scenario of the region in terms of infrastructure in educational institutions; IT-connectivity of educational institutions; upgrading quality of teaching of science and mathematics; meaningful education; and vocationalisation of education. It was further stated that NEREC has formulated a road map for rejuvenating the educational system in the NE in the context of the socioeconomic milieu relevant to the needs of the people of the region.

4.0 Objectives and Methodology

4.1 Objectives of the study

The following are the research objectives of the study:

- (1) To study the developments in ODL system of education in the region.
- (2) To study the innovative practices adopted by the ODL system in the field of ICT towards imparting education for all.

- (3) To study the role of ODL system towards economic development of the North-East.

4.2 Methodology

The paper is solely based on secondary information collected from different sources like journal articles, reports of concerned organization and websites of different ODL institutes and KKHSOU.

5.0 Developments in the field of ODL system of Education in the North East Region

The Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system has undergone a rapid transformation. Not only that some new need based areas of study have been incorporated into the curriculum but also the teaching pedagogy has changed considerably. Added to this, student services have improved, modern technological based delivery modes have been introduced and a variety of collaborative relationships have been developed. The recent developments in the field of ODL systems have been identified and hence are categorized into eight areas: quality assurance, curriculum, policy and management, student services and tutoring and ICT innovations. Today all the ODL institutions across the North East have a separate building in the premises of the concerned University. With modern and state of art infrastructure, these institutions have been able to deliver the courses effectively to its learners.

Assuring the best of quality is what has been the genuine effort of ODL system of learning. Quality Assurance is becoming even more important as ODL becomes popular and faces a proliferation of borderless education. All the institutions of distance learning in the North-East as well as KKHSOU, stresses on maintaining quality in its objective and mission statement. Catering to the needs of the hour, IGNOU had introduced a wide range of courses in its curriculum. It is because of the availability of courses that the number of admissions is significantly rising. Also, apart from the graduate, post graduate and diploma courses, KKHSOU also introduced the D.El.Ed. programme for teacher education and ICT enabled programmes. It is indeed noteworthy that KKHSOU is the first such academic institution in the North East that has facilitated the introduction of learning for jail inmates. It is certainly a developmental and innovative aspect for ODL in the region. The ODL system of learning, because of its flexibility and cost effectiveness, has seen an upward trend in its development.

6.0 Innovative ICT Practices adopted by the ODL Providers in the Region

The Information and Communications Technology (ICT) has re-oriented the learning process in the ODL system in the region. The introduction of ICT has made the teaching-learning process much interesting and effective. It will not be wrong altogether if I may mention the ICT based learning has broken the trends of the otherwise conventional ways of learning by providing both the teachers and the learners a much more wider field for discussing and exchanging of ideas. Like in the other parts of the country, North-East too has seen a spurt in the use of technology to enhance learning through distance mode. IGNOU provides multi-channel, multiple media teaching-learning packages for instruction and self-learning. “Gyan Vani”, a unique Radio Service of IGNOU, have played a prominent role in supplementing the teaching-learning process. “Gyan Dhara” is yet another landmark initiated by IGNOU which is an Internet audio counselling service wherein students can listen and participate in the live discussions of the teachers and experts on the topic of the day. The Institute of Distance and Open Learning (IDOL), Gauhati University has introduced ‘E-Governance@Idol’ wherein one can look for old question papers, Online study material, view marks etc. It was in the year 2011 the first Campus Radio of the North-East, “Radio Luit” was introduced in the premises of IDOL, Gauhati University to cater to the needs of the students. IDOL, GU has launched the first “e-portal” of the North-East namely www.bodhidroom.idolgu.org on November 13, 2009. This portal has thus become a key tool for the delivery and development of educational contents to be used by teachers, experts and students not only from the North-East but also from other parts of the world. Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU) had also launched quite a few ICT enabled programmes for the students. The ICT enabled programmes of KKHSOU provides audio-video lectures without internet, digital and printed study material and lectures from highly qualified experts. Moreover the community radio of KKHSOU, “Jnan Taranga” 90.4 FM has made a big stride in the world of academic ICT. The “E-bidya” portal of KKHSOU is also an innovative step for making learning interesting and much convenient for its learners. Also it is indeed noteworthy to mention that an innovative initiative of the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), Govt. of India, the “National Mission on Education of ICT (NME-ICT) has launched “E-Pathshala” at the Centre for Distance and Open Learning (CODL), Tezpur University wherein a student can get access to many different subjects and modules. Such

initiatives are sure to have a direct impact on quality of education as well as on the increase of Gross Enrolment Ratio in the North Eastern Region.

7.0 ODL and Economic Development of North-East

The North-East region will be economically developed only when the alarming rate of rise in unemployment can be minimized considerably thereby making its people self-sufficient. To address this need, concentration should not only lie on the general mode of education but primarily on the vocational mode as well. Several short-term and employability-oriented courses must be introduced by different ODL institutions so as to meet the needs of the people. In this regard, Lama, S., (2012), has mentioned that IGNOU and KKHSOU had taken up an initiative for some short-term competency-based developmental programmes. In its quest for building a sustainable economy, KKHSOU had initiated a wide range of training programmes in areas related to Welding, Plumbing, Pump Installation, house wiring, 2/3 wheeler maintenance and repairing, computer application, beautician, AC motor rewinding, 4 wheeler servicing, repairing of domestic appliances, RCC masonry, etc. Moreover, certificate courses on Scientific Piggery farming (CSPF), Commercial Goat Rearing (CCGR) and Commercial Layer farming (CCLF) and Commercial Duck Farming (CCDF) are other areas of KKHSOU. Such programmes cannot just educate the people but also make them employable thereby contributing towards the growth of the economy of the region in particular and the country in general. IGNOU, on the other hand, has also launched some need-based courses, particularly certificate courses in Diabetes care of Community Workers, Interior Design, and Handmade Paper Items. Vocational Training Programmes in Mobile Repairing, Conventional Lathe, Soft Skill, Development Programmes, Motor Cycle Repairs, Screen Printing, and Fundamentals of Computer Application, Water harvesting, Integrated Farming System and Leadership Development Programmes are other commendable initiatives of IGNOU to engage more people into the formal sector.

Therefore such employability-oriented programmes will not only enhance self-sufficiency amongst the learners but will also take the region to greater heights of development.

8.0 Findings

From the above study, it is found that the ODL system of education in the North-East region has witnessed a massive transformation as compared to a few

decades ago. With modern and state-of-art infrastructure combined with updated Information and Communication Technology (ICT) along with flexibility in learning and cost effectiveness, the ODL system has turned out to be the most preferred for most aspirant learners who were otherwise unable to enrol in the conventional mode. This is evident from the data that during 2014-2015 and 2015-2016, the number of enrolments in University in the Distance mode in Post Graduate and Under Graduate level is far higher than those in the Regular Courses. Distance and Open Learning (DOL) institutions like Institute of Open and Distance Learning, Gauhati University, Directorate of Distance Education (DDE), Dibrugarh University, Center for Open and Distance Learning (CODL), Tezpur University, Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) and Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU), the first and only state University of the North-East have adopted modern technologies in the delivery of their course curriculum which has not only made learning much interesting but also have become much easier for learners staying far and wide. Radio Luit, www.bodhidroom.idolgu.org are some of the innovative technological initiatives of IDOL, Gauhati University while E-bidya, Jnan Taranga 90.4 FM and E-pathshala are some such initiatives of KKHSOU and CODL, Tezpur University respectively. With the introduction of ICT Enabled courses by KKHSOU, the learners can now study every module of any courses of the University from anywhere and at anytime. The DOL system has indeed made learning much comfortable. Vocational education is the need of the hour. In order to address the growing demand for job creation and eradication of abject poverty, it is imperative that the ODL institutions introduce certain skill oriented programmes in its course curriculum. In this regard, it is found that the introduction of different short term skill oriented courses by IGNOU as well as KKHSOU has made most learners self-sufficient and therefore can contribute effectively towards the development of the region.

9.0 Conclusion

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that the role of Distance and Open Learning (DOL) is very important for the overall development of the North East region and it has indeed adopted some significant steps in this direction. DOL system can no longer be regarded as inferior to the traditional mode of education. Today more and more learner's are looking at DOL institutions for attaining a knowledge. It will not be wrong if I may say that the Open Universities and Institutions

shoulder the dual responsibility of educating the people and enlightening them with knowledge and also contribute immensely towards the economic development of the region.

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