Socio-Economic Effects of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) on Students' Mental Status: A Study

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"Life is not divided into semesters. You don't get summers off and very few employers are interested in helping you *find yourself*. Do that on your own time." - Bill Gates.

1. Introduction:

A revolutionary change in the Indian education system occurred in the 1960's with the introduction of Open and Distance Learning, and the establishment of around 34 ODL Universities till the 1990s. The establishment of Distance education Universities was stimulated by the government's intention to make learning lifelong and democratize the education system. Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), the second Open and Distance University of the country, was established just after the Andhra University (1982). Over the time, ODL education system grew rapidly. Education policy and legislation in India emphasize equity of access and fair chances of success to anyone who seeks to realize their potential through opportunities. India has high level of unemployment, adult illiteracy and socio economic inequalities prevailing in the present time, which are affecting the mental status of its citizens. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Universities are framed with an aim to provide education to working adults who neither have the time nor the means to study for a higher educational qualification in the regular and formal mode of education at full time universities (Koul and Bhatt, 1989).

Families with low socio-economic status are less likely to have financial resources and availability of time to provide their children with academic support and they lead stressful life. Growing up in a family with low socio- economic status (SES) is associated with substantially worse health and impaired psychological well-being, and impaired cognitive and emotional development throughout the lifespan. Development of mental ability of human occurs within a socio-economic condition. Socio economic- status has a deep effect on cognition, academic achievement and mental satisfaction.

2. Objective:

This study is an attempt to analyse the socio–economic effect of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) on student's mental status.

3. Methodology:

Literature survey was performed to have an idea of the situation. Moreover, personal experience of learning through Open and Distance mode played an important role in coming through the various aspects of learning in a comfortable manner.

4. Socio-economic Effects of ODL:

Stress Free Life: Stress affects the family as well as social relationships. Inequalities in distribution of wealth, resources and social benefits are increasing in India. Deprivation of education due to economic condition or busy scheduled of life, can lead to chronic stress and thereby effect overall development. ODL reduces the stress of life because now anybody can get an education even while working.

Removal of Social Barrier: Some customs and traditions of the country do not allow the female population of the country to attend the regular classes with opposite gender. This creates the feeling of social injustice. It makes them mentally disturbed and unable to stand on their own feet. Society can be benefited from more focus on the removal of educational inequities and efforts to reduce the educational gap.

Socio–Economic Status and Educational Issues: Low daily wage earner faces the challenges to make their ends meet. They do not get the opportunity to acquire necessary skills and knowledge in the regular mode of education. ODL provides a platform to their ability to be proved and nourished. They can gain this opportunity without hampering their livelihood. It increases the sense of freedom to feel competitive to the world.

Women and Education: From early days, the women of the rural villages of India get married young and suffer mental stress due to many problems and education remains an unfulfilled dream. Women's status is being enhanced by providing various ODL or life-long programmes (Sperling & Winthrop, 2016). The promising and practical strategy of ODL in addressing the challenges of widening access, increasing participation of women in higher education will in turn improve their status economically, socially, politically and culturally in the long-run.

Women who do not have been educated formally may be encouraged to enroll for ODL programmes so that they can compete in the modern world.

Employment Opportunities: In this competitive world, everyone is trying hard to get employed in a better position. The working people sometimes feel stressful and wearied with the existing job and position. They always aim to get better incentives and a respectable position in the society. To enjoy the promotional benefits they are required to and improve their knowledge and degree, which lead them to go for the non-formal mode of education. Those who are unemployed due to lack of education can pursue the Degree of their choice to compete in the world with their knowledge.

Cheapest Mode of Education: No doubt ODL is cheapest mode of learning. Most of the full-time programmes are comparatively expensive. With the use of the best of technologies, online or blended learning modes are provided by the ODL system, which reduces the cost substantially. Students are relieved of the burden of unnecessary expenditure in this mode of education. Expenditures such as transport charges, tuition charges and many others charges need not be paid in the ODL mode.

Providing Life Enrichment Courses: Now-a-days education is not only the mode of acquiring bookish knowledge but it is a lifelong process of self-development. ODL provides the learners the opportunity to choose any subject of their choices for their studies as per their interests and needs. This feature of ODL not only helps in reducing the mental stress among the learners but also encourages them to complete their studies. There are several life enrichment courses, which are specially meant for individuals as well as for the progress of the society.

Popularity of Education: It is a very popular mode of learning among students and teachers. It is available everywhere whether, whether be it an urban or rural area. The ODL mode is preferred by many mainly because of the facility of getting education while working. It facilitates in acquiring promotion through by completing further studies even while in job.

Time Saving Learning: ODL is time saving. In a full-time course, a student has to spend more time to complete his or her course. Many college students are not able to finish the course or assignments in the

allotted time. Therefore, they take tuition and spend more money with every extra semester. In this mode of education students are free to learn when they get time and at their favourable place. It saves the transport time and money required in the regular institution. Students can learn over the summer, in night classes, or online from a less-expensive institution. Hence, ODL could be a better method to get a higher value of an education.

Learning Forum: We can use social networks to create study webs or study groups on Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Skype etc. The role of peer group in learning is really important. There are large numbers of study and course materials, e-library, and contact classes available online. There are several self-organized hubs where students can go online to share information, ideas, questions and queries, notes, lectures, experiences, feelings, emotions, learning, talks about their classes and sharing of notes. They can interact with one another through video conference. It can be across the institutions or the world.

Sense of Self-respect: Elderly people generally hesitate to study with the younger students in formal mode of education. The ODL mode provides them an opportunity to learn things without letting anyone know about it. They are able to complete their courses and held their head high before the world. Self-respect is necessary to complete any work successfully. We all are human beings and as a human being, students have the sense of self-respect. It is a healthy feeling and sense of self-honour, self-importance, self-defence and self-worth. It can be said that it is a mental satisfaction.

Religious and Cultural Barriers: ODL has nothing to do with any candidate's cultural background. It is equal for all. The ODL mode of education encourages justice, equality and equity. It reduces the mental pressure of the students. Someone's cultural background does not affect the mental status. Sometimes, biasness can be seen in the regular classroom -in the name of religion, caste, beauty, age, marks, personality, language, way of living, culture, intelligence, institutions, gender, economic status, region, place, customs etc. We sometimes experience these kinds of partialities in our regular mode of education, but in ODL, we do not experience biasness as it provides equal opportunity to all.

5. Development of students' mental status in ODL:

- **Open Accessibility:** In the case of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), all the students are free to participate in the course irrespective of their qualification and interests.

- **Freedom of Time:** There is no question of rigidity of time to study. Thus, the learners enjoy the freedom of learning with their own choices. Some ODL courses require online presence during assignments, group and project work and/or examinations.

- **Freedom of Pace**: In ODL, learners learn at their own pace and make their own decisions about the learning path that is to be followed for their programmes.

- **Freedom from Examination Phobia:** Students get afraid of examinations and start learning for the examination instead of learning for life. Majority of the incidents of suicide and stress related problems among the students are reported are due to the examination stress and fear of failure.

- **Freedom of Place**: Learners are not required to be present at or to reside at the host institution. Most learners do not have to leave their home or workplace as they pursue a programme of study in the ODL mode.

- **Open Programming**: Open programming means instructing a student to complete a certain piece of work or assignment or project according to his or her ability, interest, and understanding. It is a computer based program available for all free of cost and the user can change it to make it more useful or error free to solve problems critically.

- **Open to Everybody**: ODL programmes are available to everyone irrespective of the students' gender, marks, religion and economic status.

6. Suggestions:

The country is suffering from the issue of child labour. Open and Distance learning mode of education is a mode of delivering education that has been designed to reach learners anywhere; in their homes, in their offices, or while travelling, through the use of modern electronic technologies, and to equip them with the learning experiences in order to qualify and obtain higher education without the requirement of attending the formal face to face mode of classes. The students of the Open and Distance learning system are assumed to be prepared for the challenges of life with the same competence as the students of the regular mode. Additional guidance to familiarize them with the distinctive culture and approaches to teaching and learning becomes necessary

(Letseka & Karel, 2013). It is wished that the schooling system, which serves as a feeder pipeline to higher education should be supported reasonably, in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning that adequately prepare school leavers to exit the schooling system with the requisite knowledge and skills to succeed in higher education. In this way, the transition from schooling to post-schooling will be eased and it would not appear as a shock to most first year university entrants.

7. Conclusion:

Against this backdrop, it can be reasonably said that the ODL mode of education system provides the space and opportunities for lifelong learning. This is critically important to understand the mental status of learners in the specific case of India where there are high levels of unemployment, adult illiteracy and enduring socio-economic inequalities.

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