Relevance of Open Educational Resources

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Open Educational Resources, as it is so coined, can be roughly understood as any kind of teaching, learning and research materials in any medium to be used in the public domain under an Open Licence, preferably under Creative Commons, that permits their free use. Thus, free availability and reusability are the key issues that can enable generations of learners to use them in both formal and non-formal mode of education. And thanks to the digital revolution of the 21st century, OER has become the buzzword in any serious educational institute of contemporary times. The OERs have enabled educators to be more creative as they have to deal with a wide range of experiences in terms of capacity and background of the learners whom they may not meet.

The report of the Forum on the Impact of Open Courseware for Higher Education in Developing Countries, UNESCO, Paris, July 2002 purposefully showcased, perhaps for the first time, the need to provide educational resources for college and university faculties to adapt in accordance with their curricular and pedagogical requirements. By referring to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology University (MITU) Open Courseware Initiatives, the participants of the Forum praised MITU's support in producing materials for approximately 2000 courses freely available for use by faculties and students from all over the world. A Forum like this not only paved the way for more recent discussions of intellectual property issues, but also helped define the primary stakeholders for such initiatives. One of the major contributions of the Forum was the adoptions of various educational projects in the developing countries.

Almost a decade later, the World Congress on Open Educational Resources, UNESCO in June, 2012, in order to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the 2002 UNESCO Forum that coined the term Open Educational Resources, urged for developing and adapting the OERs in different languages to suit different contexts and encouraging open licensing of educational materials produced with the help of public funds. Since then, along with the emergence of various higher educational institutions of different sorts, there can be seen a major move by such institutions towards the creation of open educational contents along with printed textbooks and other reading materials. Besides MITU, other world-ranking universities like Stanford, Yale, University of Michigan, University of California, United Nations University. Etc., have been offering courses on a wide variety of areas like Business, Energy, Fine Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, science and technology and have largely contributed internationally to improved teaching-learning activities. Such initiatives have helped both the learners and the educators in general but also the common masses which can use these resources and reuse the contents for knowledge upgradation in a competitive world.

In the context of India, where the cost of education is increasing day by day, OER may be very useful for educating the poor people living in various adverse areas in which establishing formal educational institutes is a far cry due to geographical and sociopolitical barriers. For these people, the cost of taking admission in schools and colleges, and acquiring textbooks and other reading materials is much higher than the family's monthly income. Hence, OER development may be a timely solution for reaching out to these people and realizing the mottos like Zero Tolerance and Inclusive Education. Besides, these resources can be usefully taught through the community colleges regarding the establishment of which there are clear guidelines under the MHRD, Government of India. However, the important point at this juncture is how to ensure the production and availability of educational contents produced with the help of public funds, which in a way fulfils one of the important objectives of the OER revolution today.

The NPTEL project funded by the MHRD was an important Indian initiative undertaken by seven IITs and the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore in 1999. So far, it has been instrumental in promoting e-learning through online courses on Engineering and Technology, Humanities and Social Sciences, etc. Following this, ICRISAT, Hyderabad created a number of open access learning materials on agricultural practices under Virtual Academy for the Semi-Arid Tropics (VASAT) to promote literacy on natural resources. Then, a premiere educational institution like IGNOU started the FlexiLearn project to promote personal learning by providing free access to its courses. India has become a very large producer of OERs in Asia along with other advanced countries like China, Korea and Japan. Today, many other universities and educational institutions in India have created OERs, which means OERs is no longer a nascent phenomenon in India. It is important to note that such resources are not only being used in the open and distance mode of education, but the concept of open access is also being increasingly used in the face-to-face and formal mode of education. Many of such resources are also gaining tremendous popularity as YouTube lectures.

In Assam, the decision taken by the Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU) to release its course materials and research activities under open licensing, has been seen by many as an important step that should encourage other higher educational institutes of the State to do the same. The KKHSOU is not only trying to identify the need of various stakeholders, but also making them producers of valuable e-contents. It has been producing important educational resources in the local languages to meet local requirements. Till now the university has uploaded around 90 videos on the YouTube. However, it should also consider producing e-contents in contextually relevant areas like Environment and Disaster Management, Sustainable Agriculture, Business and Local Entrepreneurship, etc., to be used by any person who has an internet connection. Other premiere institutions of the State should also go for development of their own policies of OER and copyright and contribute meaningfully to the people in general.