

OER: A NEW FRONTIER FOR OPEN KNOWLEDGE MOVEMENT IN THE NORTH EAST OF INDIA

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Abstract

The North East India Vision Document 2020, released on July 2 2008, includes education as an important component for achieving a high level of human development in this region of India. However, where there is a mismatch between the pace of development in higher education and employment in the whole of India, NE India is trapped within multifarious problems as the educated youths here are facing acute unemployment problems, which in turn has contributed to mass scale social restlessness in the region. Lack of adequate application-oriented academic courses without any focus on specialised knowledge or skill development has churned out thousands of graduates and post-graduates who are particularly unfit for any employment. Despite the presence of a large number of conventional higher educational institutions in NE India, the GER is yet to be fully harnessed. Although the total GER in NE India is higher than the national average (i.e. 20.4%), the GER in the North East Indian states seems to be varied—for example, a state like Manipur has 36% GER, followed by Arunachal Pradesh (26.9%), Sikkim (24.2%), Mizoram (21.6%), Nagaland (21.5%), Meghalaya (17.5%) and Assam (13.4%) respectively. Although there has been a mass-rooming of higher educational institutions under the auspices of both private and public parties in this part of India, they have failed to accommodate the increasing number of learners because of their restrictive nature. Here, ODL in particular can play a significant role in transforming and empowering the vibrant adult population of this region into productive human resources by providing training and equipping them with need-based skills and education which are necessary for a decent standard of living. Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU), the only State Open University in NE India, has an important role to play in taking important initiatives not just to provide education but to produce functionally literate people who can be the harbingers of change in this region. Besides, in bringing in functional literacy with the help of Community Communication Centres and other offline and online resources, OERs may be seen as an option to develop this region educationally, economically and socially. In fact, it is through OERs that one can be a part of the Open Knowledge Movement for ensuring equity and justice among the people of this region in terms of education, health and employment in near future.

Introduction

For the greater interest of the general public and the stakeholders, the use of Open Educational Resources (OERs) have presented itself as the most viable option to disseminate knowledge and information in today's world. This is very important because ensuring the formation of a knowledge-enabled population is one of the major challenges in the higher education system in a country like India. When the use of various resources in an educational institution needs to justify its holistic role, OERs can be seen as the solution. In today's world, OERs have emerged as the resources to be used for sharing, adapting and reusing in order to educate the whole masses. But, when the usefulness of OERs has generated a full-fledged international response, the use of OER in India is still in the state of infancy although the initiatives taken under MOOCs may push the OER-movement in India to a significant height in the days ahead. This paper seeks to address the prospects and possibilities of an OER-led Open Knowledge Movement that can be initiated by the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institute like KKHSOU in the North Eastern part India.

Objective of the Study

The primary objective of the study is to assert the significant impact OERs can have in creating a knowledge-enabled population through functional literacy in the true sense in the North Eastern region of India. Today, in India, along with the conventional mode, the ODL mode has also been growing at the fastest rate for disseminating knowledge and information to all sections of people in society. The findings of the present study will help in formulating important institutional decisions regarding what an ODL institution such as the existing State Open University in the North East of India can do to impart useful and practical education to the people of this region through the use of OERs in an equitable manner.

Research Questions

To achieve the objective of the study, the following research questions are sought to be undertaken for discussion:

- (a) What is the need for OERs in the North East of India for ameliorating the educational scenario in the region?
- (b) How can OERs be related to the Open Knowledge Movement for creating a knowledge-enabled population in the region?
- (c) How can a State Open University, with the help of OERs, become instrumental in bringing functional literacy among the people and providing economic security, educational security, and human security?

Significance of the Study

This study is of tremendous significance as education in the present century must combat all forms of exclusiveness. The North Eastern Region Vision Document 2020, released on July 2 2008, includes education as an important component of achieving a high level of human development in this region of India. This has particular relevance because the educated youth are facing acute unemployment problems, which in turn, has contributed to large scale social restlessness in the region. Lack of adequate application-oriented academic courses without any focus on specialized knowledge or skill has churned out thousands of graduates and post graduates in the region who are rarely fit for any employment. Here, ODL in particular can play a significant role in integrating them with the ‘mainstream’ of society since it is endowed with the capacity to reach out both to the urban and rural; trained and un-trained; employed and unemployed people. The success will depend on the provision of effective learning and training materials which are specifically designed to provide quality education and which enable the learners to take social responsibilities with dignity. Therefore, policies have to be made by the ODL institution like KKHSOU so that educational resources can be released in the Public Domain in the form of OERs without charging any fees, and thereby make education accessible to the whole of society. This will help us to realise the fact that a university is a people’s institution and reflects people’s wishes and expectations.

Literature Review

While doing the study, the following literatures on the use of OERs have been consulted.

1. *Open Educational Resources: An Asian Perspective*, edited by Gajaraj Dhanarajan and David Porter, COL and OER Asia, 2013.

This book has been designed to address the perspectives on OER by the Asian countries like China, Hong Kong, India, Malaysia, Pakistan, Indonesia, Vietnam, Japan, Korea and so on. Besides, it also provides some important case studies conducted in some Asian Open Universities the discussions of which provide many important ideas regarding the use and practices of OERs in the context of Asia. The experiences gained through the findings in this book will help us to conduct the OER practices in the NE Region in extensive ways.

2. *Quality Assurance Guidelines for Open Educational Resources: TIPS Framework Version 1.0*, Paul Kawachi, CEMCA, 2013.

The Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA), New Delhi has been promoting meaningful, relevant and appropriate use of ICT-enabled OERs to serve the educational and training needs of the Commonwealth member states of Asia. In this book, TIPS stands for Teaching and learning process, Information and material content, Presentation, product and format, and System, technical and technology. These guidelines are sought to be made user-friendly in an accessible manner so that readers can easily grasp its intended meaning and purpose. Institutions like KKHSOU, which are both using OERs and creating OERs, can be benefitted by adopting these guidelines for internal quality assurance as well as disseminating knowledge through Open Access.

3. *Open Access Curricula for Researchers and Library Schools*, UNESCO, 2015.

UNESCO has developed a total of 9 modules on Open Access—5 for the Researchers and 4 for the Library Schools, as part of its endeavour to build inclusive knowledge societies through information and communication which is also one of the key objectives for UNESCO's Medium-Term Strategy. By adopting this objective, the member states of UNESCO have recognized that knowledge plays a key role in economic growth, social development, cultural enrichment and democratic empowerment. Subsequently, UNESCO has issued a unique mandate to work on Open Access (OA) policy to bridge knowledge pools on OA across the world. By consulting these modules as models, KKHSOU can also design its SLMs as part of Open Access applicable in the entire NE Region.

But despite the initiatives taken by both COL and CEMCA, OERs in the Indian context is still in the state of infancy. Although CEMCA is taking important initiatives, Indian educational institutions are yet to understand the meaning and benefits of OERs. Very few studies on OERs in the Indian universities have been done so far. But in the context of NE India, no such study has been done yet. Therefore, the present study bears tremendous significance. The high level decisions taken by KKHSOU to release its SLMs and other multimedia materials as OERs is to be seen as a welcoming step that may transform this institute into a knowledge-hub in the whole North East of India.

Methodology

While writing this paper, the descriptive research methodology has been used. However, the paper is also analytical in nature based on the extraction of data from secondary sources.

Discussion

The Present Scenario of Education in India and the North East

In the present-day India, it is observed that alleviation of poverty, guiding the youth in the right direction etc. can be ensured only through developing proper manpower planning and enhancing employability by imparting useful and skill-based knowledge. Moreover, in today's India, nearly 54% of the population is below 25 years, and 65% is below 35 years. (Census of India, 2011) This is the most productive age group and hence considered an asset for the country. Therefore, for leading this vibrant age group of people in the right direction by developing their knowledge, attitude and skills, higher education is an absolute necessity for a country like India. But providing education to all has been one of the greatest challenges India has been facing because of lower level of GER (20.8 % for 18-23 years of age group as per MHRD Report 2011-12) compared to other developing countries, regional and gender disparities in the field of literacy and so on. However, the fact is that only 5% of the population of 19-24 age has acquired some skills through vocational education, when the corresponding figure for a country like Korea is as high as 96 %. (Twelfth 5 Year Plan, 2012-17 on Social Sectors, Vol 3). Therefore, it is an urgent need to have a democratisation of education to increase the GER so that everyone can get equal opportunity in education without any bias and differentiation.

The North Eastern part of India is one of Asia's great natural and anthropological reservoirs and is often obscured from the outside world by dense forests and formidable mountain ranges. This region shares borders with countries like Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh, and is a beautiful collision zone of different tribal cultures, climates, landscapes and peoples. Today, eight states constitute India's North East that contains 8 % of India's total size, and covers an area of 2,62,230 sq. km., with a total population of 38,857,769. (Census 2011) When the total literacy rate of India is 74.04 %, the total literacy rate in the six states of North East India (Mizoram 91.58%, Tripura 87.75 %, Sikkim 82.20%, Nagaland 80.11 %, Manipur 79.81 %, and Meghalaya 75.48% respectively) is higher than the national average except in the two states—Assam (73.18%), and Arunachal Pradesh (66.25 %). However, the rate of adult literacy in the NE Region is much higher than the other states of India. The youths of the age group of 25-35 in the NE are self-employed in non-agricultural activities (12-14%), whereas the all India rate for the same is 7.3 % only.

But despite having a higher literacy rate and work-force, the higher educational institutions are unable to cater to the needs of this work force. For example, the state of Assam has the lowest GER (13.4 % as par MHRD Report 2012-13) compared to other North Eastern states followed by Tripura (13.6%). Although the average GER of North East is higher than the national average, the present GER has failed to translate into higher employability or productivity. Presently, in the North East India, there are only 8 Central Universities, 6 Institutes of Technologies including 1 IIT, 1 IIM, 2 NITs. Besides, these institutes, there is a Regional Centre of IGNOU, one State Open University and several Directorates of ODL institutions. But, the number of such institutes is comparatively very less against the population of this region. An Indian state like West-Bengal, which is adjacent to the North East Region, has more educational institutions than the NE Region as a whole. In the absence of educational avenues, employment, economic independence, the frustrated youths of this region are resorting to different anti-social activities like drug abuse, human trafficking, insurgency, and other social ills which may further affect the growth of a healthy society in this part of India.

Need of ODL for Creating Open Knowledge Movement through OER

It is important that the NER Vision statement 2020 gives special attention to region-specific needs in the educational sector. It aims to bridge the gap between different geographical areas, in terms of health-related facilities. The Report also recognizes that around 80% of job creation is still in the agricultural and allied sectors, and hence, there is a need to promote and build entrepreneurial capabilities and provide vocational education to diversify the employment opportunities especially to

the youth. But a developmental strategy based on the resources of the region calls for an enhancement of skills among the young population. Since, it is also important to develop people's capacities to equip them to participate productively in economic activities; capacity building of institutions should address societal needs on priority basis. Creation of education and training facilities for the youth of the Region in different pertinent areas would provide a great impetus in generating employment opportunities for the youth.

But the high literacy rate in the region, has not translated into any kind of employability in productive occupations. At present, the educated youth have very few opportunities for expanding their horizons and realising their potential, as the focus of the very few higher educational institutions has been to prepare the youth for routine government jobs. Besides, while there has been a tendency to emphasise general subjects in higher education, vocational education has not yet found the required focus. But, skill-development is extremely important to expand people's employment opportunities in the manufacturing and tertiary sectors. For example, training in nursing can expand productive employment opportunities for the women in the region. Thus, through different sorts of need-based training, the people of this region can be gainfully employed in a variety of areas like agro-processing, horticulture, handicrafts, information technology, paramedical science, biotechnology, aviation, entertainment and hospitality industries, tourism and so on. However, the increase in the number of higher educational institutes in this region in the last few years provides an ideal opportunity to gear higher education towards creating value in society.

But, when there is a need to address the wants of the people in a positive direction and to make them vibrant human capital, education in the context of NE India is supposed to be need-based. Therefore, apart from the conventional system of education, ODL and Open and Distance E-Learning (ODEL) systems have been adopted for starting a new frontier for socio-economic development in the state. By launching various general, professional and vocational courses, the ODL system has provided educational opportunities to those who are deprived to get education due to various constraints. In this regard, the National Knowledge Commission of 2005 rightly stated that the appropriate application of knowledge in agriculture can play a major role in boosting the agrarian economy and giving the Indian farming a competitive edge in the global market, and ODL institutes can play the pioneering role for that. Commonwealth of Learning (COL) also has demonstrated that by using Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and flexible and blended learning approaches, access to quality technical and vocational skills development can be increased which can further help to overcome the urban-rural and gender divides that exclude learners from skills training to create a skilled workforce of life-long learners for the growth of informal and formal economies. But, the call for setting up of new public institutions, increased public spending on education and other social sectors etc. can be best realized through the production of OERs which can make the best use of the money received from the public for the public. Thus, the ODL mode of education, through the use of OERs, has the potential to create the knowledge-movement in every aspects of human life in society in general.

The OER Movement in India

For the greater interest of the general public or the stakeholders, the use of OERs has presented itself as the most viable option to disseminate knowledge and information in the whole of India. The historical and functional definition of OER, as has been pointed out by UNESCO in 2002 is: "Technology-enabled, open provision of educational resources for consultation, use and adaptation by a community of users for non-commercial purposes...typically made freely available over the Web or the Internet." (Kawachi 2013) In India, where higher education usually benefits only a small section of the people, because of its being a very costly affair, OERs have provided myriad opportunities to enjoy the benefits of education even without going to an educational institute. Of late in India, the initiatives taken under MOOCs have pushed the OER movement to a significant height in recent times. With the help of the different Community Information Centres, NGOs and other Social and Government Organizations located at different parts of the country, educational institutions may use OERs that can enlarge teaching experiences, expand the reach of education, and make learning

possible through participation and from multiple sources at the same time. Of late in India, following the National Knowledge Network Project, various courses have been launched, particularly by the ODL institutions, which became instrumental in training people mostly in the field of agriculture and small-scale industries for a better socio-economic growth of India. Thus, OERs can be seen as an evolving pedagogy in the context of present-day India.

The Role of KKHSOU in Accelerating the Open Knowledge Movement through OER

In the context of higher education in the NE Region of India, the role KKHSOU has played in its 9 years of existence as the only State Open University, has confirmed that a university is a public property, and that it can take bigger responsibilities in encouraging the ‘pedagogy of the oppressed’ in a technology-aided educational environment. KKHSOU has played a leading role by enrolling over 1,50,000 learners in different disciplines since the time of its establishment in 2006. KKHSOU is not only trying to identify the need of various stakeholders, but is also making them producers of valuable e-contents by trying to engage them in a variety of collaborative activities like producing audio-visual contents on areas like agriculture, small scale industries, mobile phone repairing and so on. It has been also producing important educational resources in local languages to meet local requirements. Till now, the university has uploaded around 100 videos on the YouTube which can be accessed through www.youtube.com/user/kkhsou. In addition to the traditional programmes, KKHSOU has been offering various need-based certificate and vocational training programmes on Computer application, Two/three wheeler repairing, Electrical House Wiring, Apiculture, Garment Designing, Scientific Tea Cultivation, Commercial Poultry Framing and so on. Besides, with the help of the different polytechnic institutes, situated at different parts of the state, this university has been successfully offering vocational training courses on areas like Welding, Plumbing, Electrical House Wiring, Repairing of Electrical Home Appliances, Cutting and Tailoring and so on, and encouraging the youths to develop self-entrepreneurship to take up various jobs. The courses have been being imparted through telecast, radio broadcasting and audio-visual programmes in the form of CD and DVD.

KKHSOU is also one of the few North East Indian universities which recently signed an MoU with the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) on introducing skill-based courses in the study centres of the University. Accordingly, a study centre can choose up to two skill sectors in areas like Retail, Automotive, Tourism and Hospitality, Healthcare, Electronic and Agriculture for the learners. This has been yet another welcoming step taken by a new university to have been influenced by a humanistic and holistic goal in education. Besides, linking with the different communities and the youth of the society by undertaking various socio-cultural activities to generate awareness on academic, social, environmental issues etc., and starting various activities on conservation of historical resources as well the biodiversity in the nearby areas of its campus, may be seen as the first ever initiative by a state university in the last 10 years in this corner of India. Keeping pace with the national development, KKHSOU is also considering new certificate and diploma programmes on other vocational areas like Animation, Photography, Counselling, Theatre & Stage Craft, Food Processing, Printing Technology, Packaging, Stress Management, Value based education through Yoga, Handicrafts, Performing Arts and so on. It is expected that soon KKHSOU, by producing contents in the form of OERs in the area mentioned, will emerge as a leading transnational university which will invite national and international collaborations, thus translating many of the visions of this university into a reality. The experience of KKHSOU may be seen as a wake-up call for other premiere institutions of the state to develop their own policies of OERs, and contribute meaningfully to the entire North Eastern Region of India.

Conclusion

Against this background of bringing functional literacy in the whole of NE, the strategic role the ODL intuitions in this part of India have played has been very important. The ODL institutions like KKHSOU, because of its capacity to reach out to more and more people of this region, should be the think-tank to design and offer need-based courses for developing the manpower in the society and utilizing the local and regional resources. Thus, production of OERs on various professional and vocational areas not only for the learners enrolling in them but also for the common masses has been seen as the call of the hour. The educational institutions, run by both conventional and ODL modes, can make the best use of OERs on the basis of available technologies and make knowledge-enabled population in the state a reality and enhance the Open Knowledge Movements by keeping pace with the South East Asian development. With the help of OERs, social justice can be provided to a large extent which may further help in redressing the various social inequalities experienced during social, political, educational, economical, and cultural transformations in a remote place like the North East of India. It is hoped that the experience of KKHSOU will become the harbinger of change in this part of India.

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