

Education as a Life Long Activity: Empowering the 'Elderly' Indians through Open Distance Learning

Kajal De

Sampurna Goswami

1. Introduction:

The word 'underprivileged' is often used to describe a situation where a person is deprived of certain values and benefits. The Oxford English dictionary defines the term 'underprivileged' as a person who is not enjoying the same benefits and rights as the majority of the people in a society. We often designate a person or a group of persons in a society as underprivileged when they are deprived of social goods and services, for instance health care facilities, primary education, employment and so on and so forth. However, underprivileged in the context of education and knowledge can be defined in various ways. In a narrower sense, those individuals who have been deprived of education from elementary level due to the lack of primary schools, poverty, lack of communication networks etc. can be considered underprivileged. On the other hand, in a much broader sense those individuals who, in spite of having feasible conditions to pursue education whether elementary or higher, are compelled to drop out from the process, voluntarily or involuntarily can also be considered underprivileged. However, those who 'voluntarily' skip their education or school life may not be considered as underprivileged.

Following the above explanation of the term 'underprivileged' and its application in the sphere of education, we can thereby claim that those sections of the society and particularly those individuals who had to leave their education at an early age for various reasons for instance jobs, family life, business, economic crisis, due to the lack of motivation or for that matter some other social and personal issues are essentially underprivileged. Often in most cases the rural and semi-urban category of the population and the women folk are considered to be deprived of education. Various studies had been conducted to understand the numerous socio-economic aspects and determinants that led to the deprivation of education amongst these sections. However, not many studies have been conducted in order to analyse the fact that apart from

the woman and the rural population, there is another category that had been deprived of education, particularly higher education, is the aged adults. Before proceeding into further details, it is important that a significant definition of the “Aged Adults” is mentioned. The question is who are the Aged Adults? Aged Adults are the elderly population of any country, in other words, Aged Adult is a literary meaning of the term elderly, which is very commonly used to identify the aged people. It can be stated that the aged adults are that portion of a given population whose year of birth ranges from 1950s to 1970s. Or else it can be said that the population size irrespective of their sex, religion, caste, creed and social status whose age ranges from 50s to 70s and above in a particular nation are considered the Aged Adults.

Adult education or andragogy as an area of research, debates and discussions began around 1970 in the United States and United Kingdom (Malcolm S. Knowles, 2015). However, with the development of medical sciences a substantive growth in the adult population has been witnessed in all the countries. With the advent of globalization where the world has virtually converged, this adult elderly population has become much more inquisitive in nature and are also keen to spend their lives in doing certain objective work. In other words, they are much more motivated and interested in learning new things in order to keep themselves updated with the fast changing world. However, there are debates regarding the degree of participation of the elderly learners in education. What is the type of participation of the elderly learners in the education is also an important question. (Richard Edwards, 1993)

Likewise, the elderly learners are a substantive amount, enrolling in the higher education sectors in India. There are two basic factors behind such an increase; first, the advancement of the medical sciences have helped in securing better lives for individuals which in turn have increased the average life span and the quality of life of the population. Secondly, the socialist pattern of economic growth in the immediate years after independence created secured job opportunities in the government sectors. It was much easier at that point of time to avail a government job with a mere graduation degree and as a result, most of the citizens completed their graduation degree and secured good jobs in public sectors. Today this particular section of the population makes an important category that is enrolling themselves for higher education. Apart from these retired officials, there is another category of elderly learners who had to leave their education at an early age to earn

livelihood as the breadwinner of the family, for instance businessmen. Elderly women learners are also significant in the sense that, most women tend to leave their education to bring up their children or maintaining their family life. Early marriages of girls remain one of the most distinct features of Indian culture, as a result, woman in India tend to leave their education voluntarily and after marriage, and many a times involuntarily engage themselves in maintaining their household and rearing their children. This is one of the reasons behind the increase in the number of women adults enrolling in higher education. These sections of the Indian population are essentially underprivileged in the sphere of education and thus, should be made subjects of educational research and analysis.

However, with the growth of Distance Education in India and the corresponding National Education Policy of 1986, that aims at universal literacy and lifelong education (Government of India, 1986), there is a steady rise in the number of elderly learners in the Distance Educational Institutes. What motivates elderly learners to join Distance Learning Institutes is the fact that Open Distance Learning (ODL) mode is highly flexible, and dependable. It is also important to note that ODL also has a self-directed learning approach which attracts the elderly learners to cope up easily (Lawrence, 2007). In India, it becomes very difficult for elderly learners to enrol themselves in regular institutions, thus the presence of a number of State Open Universities(SOU) besides the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) have enabled such underprivileged sections to acquire knowledge and fulfil their dreams. However, the entire population of elderly learners cannot be designated as underprivileged. A fraction of this population does seek higher degree for an enhancement of their professional life. Many learners who are still engaged in some sort of activity, for instance may be employed in private sectors or public sectors or may be small-scale business men also enroll themselves in open universities to acquire some professional degree. In both the cases, open distance education does play a pivotal role in educating the adults.

2. Objectives of the Study:

Therefore, from the above explanation we can infer that the elderly learners are an important section of the population in the education sector in India. However, few questions emerge, for instance, what are the factors that motivate the elderly learners in seeking higher

education? What are the reasons behind the dropouts of elderly learners from the educational institutions? In an era where Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is being used as an effective tool for delivering lectures, especially in the ODL mode, the question arises as to what extent are the elderly learners responding to it. Apart from these areas of analysis, what also comes forward is the fact that what is the rate of participation of elderly learners in education in India. Therefore, the objective of the paper shall be:

- i. To analyse the factors and determinants that motivate elderly population to seek higher education.
- ii. To analyse the infrastructure that India as a nation provides to meet the objective of life long education as stated in its National Education Policy of 1986.
- iii. To understand the responses to ICT enabled courses and support services in the Distance mode of education by the elderly learners.
- iv. To enumerate the reasons for the dropouts of the elderly learners from the higher learning institutions.

Therefore, to analyse all the above factors, this paper shall essentially concentrate and emphasise on relevant data that shall be collected from the Netaji Subhas Open University (NSOU), Kolkata. The paper shall focus on the elderly learners, who have enrolled themselves in the institution over the years and thereby bring out the distinctive features, problems, prospects and areas of contestations regarding the participation of the elderly learners enrolled in this particular institution and in a much broader view, in West Bengal.

3. Methodology:

As we have already enumerated the basic objectives of this particular study in the previous section, it is now important to lay down the methods through which we shall approach these objectives.

1.1 Data collection: The data regarding the enrolment of elderly learners have been collected from the NSOU administration.

1.2 Sample Selection: A Systematic Random Sampling Techniques have been used for the study. Due to a huge population size and for the convenience only three Post-Graduation courses, mainly Mathematics, Commerce and Social Work have been chosen and one Under-graduation course, mainly Chemistry have been chosen for the purpose of analysis. Mathematics is a non-laboratory based

science subject and Chemistry is an absolutely laboratory based science subject. On the other hand, Post-Graduation Commerce is a professional degree while Social Work is a subject that attracts learners from various strata of the society. These four different subjects have been chosen to make a comparative analysis of the degree of variance in learner composition for a given period in different course in a particular institution. Apart from that, Commerce and Social Work are the two courses that have been made ICT enabled since 2015. Thus, to understand the response of the elderly learners to ICT, these two courses have been chosen.

1.3 Interview: After getting the relevant data, a personal face-to-face interview was conducted where the elderly students of the selected sample were called and with help of an open-ended interview, relevant information regarding their problems and areas where they felt comfortable was noted. In few cases, through a telephonic conversation, the respondents were asked few questions which were recorded. The sample was a systematic sample of graduation and post-graduation students mainly from the courses like Mathematics and Chemistry.

In accordance with these data, the successive sections of this particular paper shall put forward few case studies of various elderly students of the university, a section of the paper shall be devoted to analyse the popularity, and acceptability of ICT enabled services of the university amongst the adult learner.

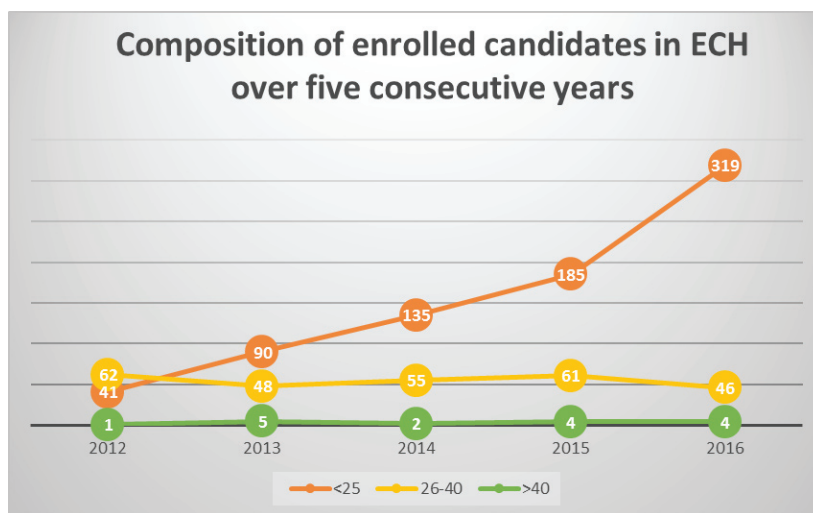
4. Case Studies from NSOU:

The information in this particular section have been collected from the Netaji Subhas Open University, Kolkata through data collection and analysis, structured and unstructured interviews and non-participant observation.

As already mentioned in the above section, an open ended, unstructured interview was conducted where respondents from the selected sample were interviewed in order to bring out the relevant data regarding the problems, prospects and opportunities of the elderly learners enrolled in Post-Graduation courses of Chemistry, Mathematics, Commerce and Social Work in NSOU. From the admission data collected, from the university administration an inference was drawn in order to show the percentage of elderly learners enrolling for courses like

Bachelors in Chemistry and Masters in Commerce and Social Work. The following section, provide the composition of enrolled candidates in the above-mentioned courses, through graphical representations.

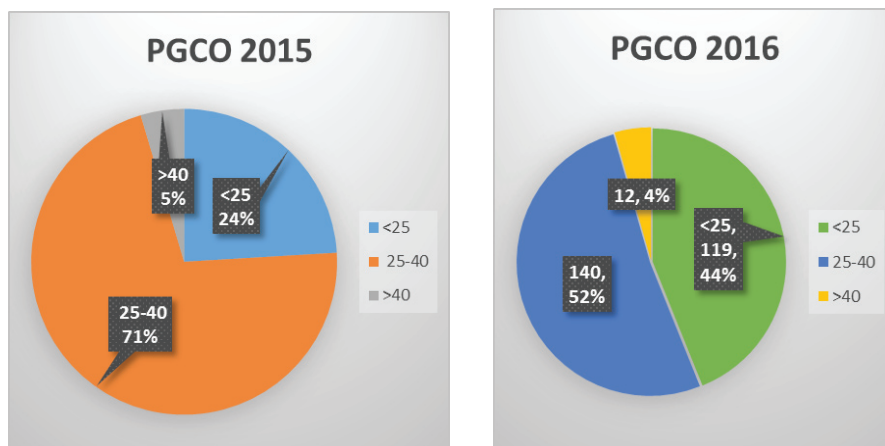
Figure 1: Graphical Representation of the Composition of Enrolled candidates in Bachelor's Degree Program in Chemistry (ECH) over five consecutive years. [Data collected from the NSOU administration]



The figure above depicts a graphical representation of the candidates enrolled in Bachelor's Degree Program in Chemistry (ECH) for five consecutive years. The figure shows that, over the years the overall enrolment of candidates have increased but the number of elderly learners (depicted through the green line) enrolling in the course have remained insignificant and somewhat steady. It was only in the years 2013, 2015 and 2016, that there has been a slight increase in the number of elderly learners but in comparison to the young learners and middle-aged learners, the number of elderly learners remains quite less. It is important to note here, the percentage increase in the enrollment in the successive years is most contributed by the young learners while the percentage of middle aged and elderly learners remains low. One reason behind this decreasing record can be attributed to the fact that Chemistry is a purely laboratory-based subject, which includes practical classes. As a result, those who have detached from education for a lengthy period may find uneasy to enroll themselves in chemistry. However, a study of theoretical subjects and disciplines may show a slightly positive result. On the contrary, if we look at the composition of enrolled candidates

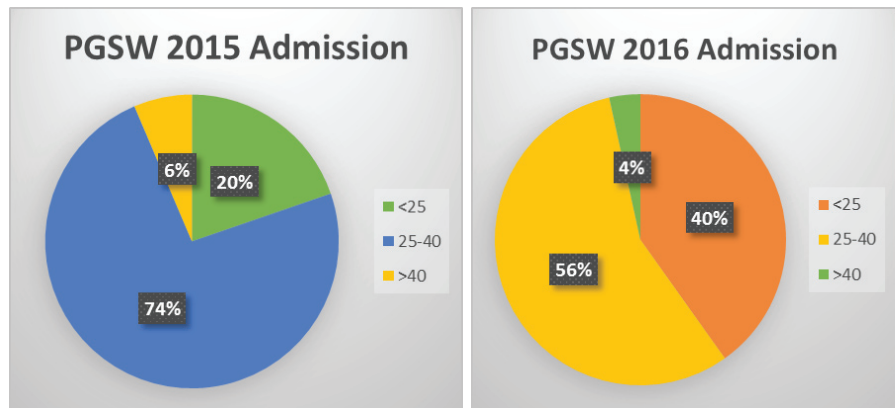
in Post-Graduation Commerce (PGCO), for two consecutive years, (Data Graphically Represented below) then we can see that there has been a considerable rise in the enrolment of elderly learners from 2015 to 2016. In 2015, only 5% of the total enrolled candidates were the elderly learners, but in 2016, the percentage decreased to 4%. However, the picture here is better than Chemistry One reason for higher enrollment of elderly learners in post-graduation program may be the fact that most aged adults had to leave their education after completing their graduation and Commerce is not a lab-based subject like Chemistry. Therefore, in order to complete the unfinished work, elderly learners are often more motivated to complete their post-graduation. A similar increase in the young and regular learners in the course is recorded in 2016, which shows that the percentage increase in the intake capacity in every course is solely contributed by the young learners.

Figure 2: Graphical Representation of Comparative Analysis of Admission Data of Post-Graduation Commerce (PGCO) for 2015 and 2016 in Percentage. [Data collected from the NSOU administration].



However, the Post-Graduation admission data of Social Work (PGSW) for two consecutive years 2015 and 2016 (Graphically Represented below) shows a considerable decrease in the number of elderly learners similar to that of Commerce. In 2015, 6% of the total enrolled candidates were elderly learners but there was a sharp decline in the number of elderly learners enrolling for PGSW in 2016, which only amounts to be 4%. What draws once attention in this matter is the lower rate of enrolment of young learners in Social Work in both the years. However, there is a slight increase in 2016 but only a two-fold increase.

Figure 3: Graphical Representation of Comparative Analysis of Admission Data of Post-Graduation Social Work (PGSW) for 2015 and 2016 in Percentage. [Data collected from the NSOU administration].



However, it is interesting to note that the candidates in middle-aged group enrolled in Post-Graduation Social Work is very high in both the years. In 2015, 74% of the total enrolled candidates belong to the middle-aged group; while in 2016, 56% of total enrolled candidates belong to this category. What is important is to understand that Social Work is a professional degree; hence, the number of candidates from middle-aged group is much more as most of the candidates from this category seek to acquire this degree for their career enhancement.

From all the above explanations, it is clear that the enrollment of adult elders in NSOU over the years in the courses considered in the selected sample have remained quite less. However, for each course in the selected sample, the number of enrolled candidates from the middle-aged group is higher compared to that of the adult elders, especially in professional courses like Commerce and Social Work but the overall increase in the percentage is contributed, essentially by the regular young candidates. However, the case is somewhat different for PGSW. Thus, it can be concluded that the enrollment of the candidates from different sections of the population varies in accordance with the courses and subjects.

When it comes to the empowerment of underprivileged, by empowerment, one can mean a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their lives, they conceive power to take right decision at the right moment not only for themselves, but

also for their communities and the entire society. Hence, education is universally considered as the most important tool to empower oneself. Henceforth it is important to analyse as to what extent, elderly section of the population is reaping benefits from the ODL mode of education.

In order to analyse the fact, an open-ended unstructured interview was conducted where the two candidates demonstrated their academic career at NSOU and their contentment in fulfilling the Post-graduation courses in Mathematics. Amongst both the respondents, one respondent have already acquired his degree and the other respondent is at verge of completion within this year.

Sabita Mazumder (Name Changed)

Sabita Mazumder, age 49 years is presently a post-graduate student of Mathematics in Netaji Subhas Open University, Kolkata. Sabita, completed her graduation from the University of Calcutta and got married at an early age of 24 years. After marriage, Sabita accompanied her husband and shifted to Mumbai. She spent 10 years of her life in Mumbai, managing her household, taking care of her family and brining up her children. Besides her everyday family life, she worked as a teacher of Mathematics in a primary, private school of Mumbai. After 10 years, Sabita and her family decided to move back to Kolkata, and here she started working as a teacher of Mathematics in Jadavpur Vidyapith, a renowned school in Kolkata. At this juncture, in 2015, she decided to enroll herself in Netaji Subhas Open University which is the primary open University in West Bengal to complete her post-graduation in Mathematics. She had done extremely well in all her semester examinations. She is a keen researcher, who gathers all information from the university website. In addition, she is very comfortable with the ICT enabled learners support system provided by the university. However, she proposed a complete review of the Self Learning Materials (SLMs) and suggested increase in the lecture hours.

Kaushik Sarkar (Name Changed)

Kaushik Sarkar, age 64 was a Post-Graduate student of Mathematics from 2013-2016. Kaushik completed his graduation in Mathematics from Calcutta University and joined the Department of Post and Telegraph, Government of India. However, his inquisitiveness and his quest to bring out something new and innovative drew him to NSOU post retirement. He wanted to complete his unfinished work and was also keen to do

some research in the field of mathematics. In order to fulfil his desire, Kaushik at the age of 60 got enrolled as a student of Mathematics in 2013. He was keen and a sincere student who attended all the classes and the Personal Contact Programs. However, what is important is to note that at the age 60, the physical capacity to learn new things gradually diminishes. Physiologically, it is difficult to learn new thing at an older age and due to weak nervous system, it becomes difficult to handle the pressure of examinations. He accepted that due to weak reflexes he had to take the examinations twice and sometimes thrice. He also accepted the fact that he required more time to understand the theories and critical mathematical formulas. In spite of these difficulties, Kaushik with his deliberate and tireless effort, successfully completed his course and was awarded the degree from the University. Presently, Kaushik is engaged in informal research work and is a frequent visitor to the University.

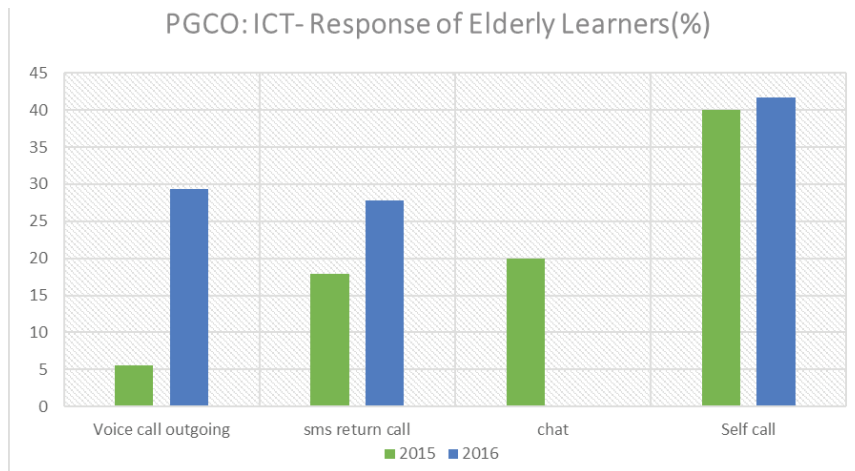
Adult Learners' Response to ICT: Cases from NSOU

[The information in this particular section have been collected from NSOU administration, the entire analysis and the graphs are prepared by the authors themselves.]

ICT is a recent development, which have been incorporated in the education sectors in India in the recent times. ICT is being increasingly used in the ODL systems in order to reach the unreached. It is also very important to note that Open Universities in India are using ICT in delivering lectures, conducting examinations and so on and so forth. Similarly, university websites are being made highly active where all sorts of notifications are being uploaded so that the candidates are not deprived of relevant information and updates.

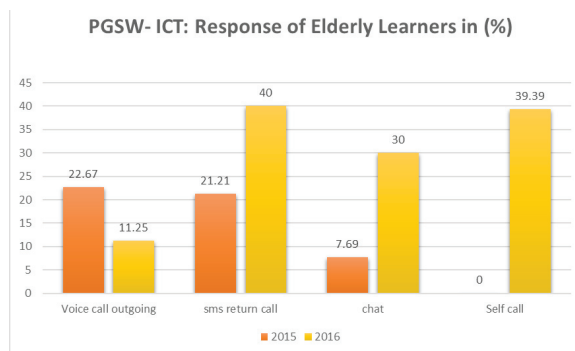
Likewise, NSOU being the primary state open university in West Bengal have started; ICT enabled Learner's Support Systems in few courses. In this context, elderly sections of Indian population, is a substantial section of students enrolling in the university and here it is important to analyse the response of this section to the ICT enabled Learners' Support Services. In order to do so, a study was conducted where two courses, Commerce and Social Work at the post graduation level that have ICT enabled learners' support services considered and a year wise comparative analysis was done in order to understand the responses of the elderly learners to ICT in 2015 and 2016.

Figure 4: PGC0: Response of Elderly Learners to ICT in (%).[Data collected from the NSOU administration].



The graphical representation above portrays the response of the elderly learners of NSOU enrolled in Post-Graduation Commerce in 2015 and 2016. The university provides four kinds of services, voice call outgoing, SMS return calls, online chats and self-calls. The graph shows that the elderly learners are most comfortable with the self-call services and highest percentage is recorded in both the years. The aged learners are uncomfortable with online chatting system and therefore not a single unit is recorded in 2016. Elderly learners are also satisfied with the SMS and voice call service but are more comfortable when they are allowed to make a call, themselves for gathering relevant information. However, all the units except chats have recorded an increase in 2016 over 2015, which shows that ICT is now being accepted widely.

Figure 5: PGSW-ICT: Response of Elderly Learners in (%)



The graphical representation for PGSW is quite different from that of PGC0. The response of elderly learners regarding the ICT enabled learners support system in Social Work records highest response for SMS return call in 2016 and lowest response for voice call outgoing in 2016. In 2015, on the other hand highest response has been recorded for voice call outgoing and no response for self-call. However, there has been a sharp increase in the response of elderly learners for all most all the services in 2016 from 2015, which is similar with PGC0. An area of contrast between PGC0 and PGSW is the response of elderly learners to chats. In case of Social Work average response have been recorded for chats, which was nearly negligible for Commerce. However, in both the cases, ICT is now being well accepted by the elderly learners, which is a positive development, especially for ODL institutes in India.

5. Conclusion:

The entire study of this particular research work was based on two important aspects, one was essentially the percentage of elderly learners getting enrolled in NSOU and the other is their response to this approach of learning and how they are reaping benefits from the present mode of learning. By now, it is quite clear that the major objective of the ODL institutes in general and the Open Universities in particular is to provide higher education to those section of the society who are either unable to enroll themselves in regular mode, to the rural population for whom accessing an educational institution is a difficult task, to those who are already engaged in some sort of activity and those who have remained underprivileged, in terms of education. This paper considerably deals with the issue of the underprivileged sections and through this study it is determined that the aged elders who had to leave their higher education are underprivileged.

However, the inferences of the studies conducted, reveals that empowerment of the elderly learners in India still reflects a gloomy picture. It is still plausible that enrollment of adult learner in BDP course remains less as in most cases candidates, irrespective of their gender, complete their graduation. However, it can be assumed that a study of other BDP courses in the university especially those, which are theoretical discipline, may present a different picture. However, the data also reveals that the enrolment of elderly learners in Post-graduation courses in NSOU remains meagre. NSOU being the sole state open university should have reflected a much better picture regarding

the aspects of enrolment. However, the positive outcomes from the entire study essentially seeks ones attention toward the fact that Open Universities in India, today runs parallel to other regular universities as a substantial population of young learner or regular learners are choosing ODL mode over the regular mode.

Open Universities are also drawing candidates from middle-aged groups, the professional, who are reaping the advantages of seeking educational degrees from open universities for the enhancement of careers and professional lives. During the course of the study, it turns into a difficult task to search for suitable candidates from the adult section who have successfully completed or are trying to complete their courses. In most cases, the elderly learners suffer from lack of motivation and interest to complete their course and it was found that they suffer from the trepidation of examinations and failures. However, amongst those who are trying hard to fulfil their dreams, a positive approach was seen, and they are quite content with the system of open learning as well as the recent incorporation of the ICT in education that are enabling them to easily achieve their desires.

Despite all the opportunities provided by the state and the institutes, somewhere there is a distance between the policy makers and the commoners. A lack of awareness regarding educational opportunities is still rampant. Elderly learners lack motivation and not much has been done in order to empower them through education. A gender discrimination still remains and the number of female elderly learners remain negligible compared to the males. However, the number of elderly learners may vary in accordance with courses, subjects or even universities but the overall picture remains a dark-shaded one that need more colours to brighten up. Although, it is quite obvious that huge amount of money is being spent on the distance learning institutions with an objective to reach the unreached, there are also few rifts in the process. The policy makers should now concentrate more on creating an awareness among the population regarding their right lifelong education, as also been enumerated in the Sustainable Development Goals Agenda 2030. In most cases, the elderly population are unaware of the fact that they can still pursue education and fulfil their objectives. ICT is an excellent footstep in disseminating education. Nowadays, the opulent elderly population uses smartphones and computers, thus learning through a virtual media will obviously be an exciting task for them. It would also be feasible if the Open Universities could arrange

for special sessions and courses for the elderly population, a course that will not be designed in a manner to judge the capabilities of the learners, in other words the courses shall be devoid of any sort of examinations, so that the elderly learners can get rid of their trepidations regarding exams and pursue a smooth academic life. However, in order to do so, the teachers should acquire the expertise to make the course more attractive to the elderly learners and should be adept to deal with the elderly learners.

India has a number of excellent institutions to deal with the issue of empowering the elderly empowerment, and being an emerging power, it is important that Indians are also empowered considerably. A nation becomes developed only when all the communities are socially consolidated and social consolidation comes from a uniformly educated society. Hence, education of the elderly adults is as important as education at the primary level. Lifelong education helps in eradicating educational disparities prevalent across amongst the various strata of the society and hence a country needs to provide not only 'quantity' but also 'quality' education to all the sections of the population.

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