

Distance Education in India: some reflections.

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Date of Submission: 08-09-2021

Date of Acceptance: 23-09-2021

I. Introduction.

The word education has sometimes been used in a very broad sense to designate the totality of influences that nature or other people are able to exercise either on our intelligence or on our will. In its broadest sense, education is any process by which an individual gains knowledge or insight and even develops new attitudes plus skills. Besides general communication of knowledge, education aids in shaping of values. Formal education is acquired through organized study of instruction as in a school or collegewhile informal education arises from day to day experiences and observations. It could even happen through relatively unplanned or undirected contacts with communications media such as books, periodicals, motion pictures, radio, television and even social media .

The function of education is both social and individual. Its social function is to help each individual become a more effective member of society by passing along to him the collective experience of the past and the present. Its individual function is to enable an individual to lead a more satisfying and productive life by preparing him or her to handle new experiences successfully. Education has also been a nomenclature given to that science or branch of knowledge that has engaged with the principles and practices of teaching and learning.

During the 20th century there was an enormous expansion of public education. Despite compulsory schooling in many countries, across the globe, changes have been taking place in the material as well as non-material aspects of education. We have seen that all over the world teachers stand or sit with a blackboard behind them and rows of children at desks in front of them. 'Chalk and talk' have often been the main ingredients of teaching, across many societies and cultures. Evolving from cave paintings, Rock carvings, alphabet, pens pencils to computers and wider use of technology, we have come a long way. So great has been the explosion of man's knowledge that everywhere one of the most serious problems facing teachers is that of selecting from an enormous stock of information.

Education as a process of sharing

Education which stresses conformity, memorization, obedience and submissiveness is well adapted to an authoritarian society in which people do not question much but simply obey. It is less well suited to a democratic society stressing initiative, freedom and social equality. Some people have even argued that education is directly linked to power in most societies. People without education are at the mercy of those with it, who can use what they know to their advantage and to the disadvantage of the ignorant around them. Education has sometimes been used as a means of gaining power and hence freedom, might simply become the right of the better educated minority. As Illich pointed out ,curriculum has always been used to assign social rank. He felt that 'schools by their very structure resist the concentration of privilege on those otherwise disadvantaged'(1971,p13)

So, education can be seen as answering crucial questions pertaining to what is worth preserving, sharing and handing down. Each society makes a decision on the basis of its educational aims and socio-political as well as economic priorities. Consequently, national systems differ in many respects with regard to their priority areas. However, abroad distinction may be drawn, between educational institutions whose principal task is to conserve cherished traditions as against those that are regarded as agents of individual and social change. Educational institutions may serve both these functions. During some stages of history they have played a dynamic role in critical thinking as well as embracing economic, social and cultural transformations. At other periods they have been rather conservative too, resistant to taking very dynamic leaps in curriculum as well as method of teaching and learning.

Distance education: the rationale

One thing that we need to be clear about is that distance education in the present paper is not to be confused with crisis distance education(CDE) that became the hallmark of all educational institutions globally, as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic related lockdowns and normative practices(Lily Abdulrahman et

al,2020).Now if one goes over the reasons for founding of distance teaching universities one can understand that they were linked to the need felt in many countries to augment university education generally and to serve society at large by offering study opportunities to erstwhile marginalised adults/groups. Increasingly, a realization arose that adults with jobs, many people's engagement with familial and social commitments comprise the majority of prospective part time/distance education university students.

In the 1980s,distance education emerged as a standard component of the provision of education in many national systems, including our own. In contrast with the conventional education which has mostly been oral and group based, distance education shattered the interpersonal communication of face to face provision and dispersed the learning group throughout the nation. To make learning more open an enterprise, distance education system has concentrated on flexibility with regard to availability of education and training to suit the interests and time spans of learners because of the development of Internet-based information technologies, and in particular the World Wide Web. Distance education got popularised where learners and the teachers cannot be in a class room or a common physical space and they happen to be geographically separated.

The significance of studying the concept of distance education is linked to its quantitative and qualitative improvement edge. This was linked to the development of new communication technology, a growing sophistication in the use of printed materials, improved design of instructional materials and provision of support services for students studying at a distance plus the foundation in 1969 of the Open University in United Kingdom and the subsequent opening up of similar models ,across the globe. Over the past many decades, a number of autonomous distance teaching institutions have been established in a number of countries. In 1983,Sewart of the Open University wrote that the earlier decade had seen an exponential spread of distance education it was going to be difficult to think solely in the traditional sense of face to face contact.(Sewart,1983)

Multicultural settings

The cultural variety of modern societies is so great that different types of societies seek different types of educational institutions whether they be schools or colleges. This would be applicable for face to face ,on site educational practices as well as distance education models. For instance a certain educational curriculum and pedagogical practice which may be ideally suited to adjustment in England might be entirely irrelevant or even hostile to the social patterns of the Eskimo in the far north or the small land holding farmer in Telangana. The educational needs of a fisherwoman or small time tiller would differ from those of an urban dweller. In our country, the formal education system is not in a position to take the load of such huge numbers because of the severe constraint of resources. There are also social, economic and cultural reasons which prevent girls, scheduled castes and tribes and children of landless laborers, urban slum dwellers etc. to enter or re-enter the formal setup of education. There are also persons whose work situations and job requirements make it impossible for them to pursue further education. For instance, persons serving in the army, railways etc who have to travel a lot or those in careers like marketing and sales can hardly find time to study on a regular basis. So, given the not too impressive or accessible scenario of formal education in India since Independence, along with its economic ,social and demographic challenges, besides cultural and political ones, distance education seems to have been a highly feasible model to work with.

The process of education has become more interesting and significant due to the use of communication media. A logical outcome of the needs of modern, rapidly changing, innovative societies has been the use of the multimedia approach to education. It is being argued that students are more likely to remember and get involved in their curriculum if formal classroom teaching is aided by a multimedia approach which includes broadcasts, print and face to face communications, including digital mode. The mass media in both formal and non-formal/distance education are versatile tools.

Learning as the decisive factor

The growing awareness that learning, not teaching is the decisive factor in education has brought support to distance education along with other methods of independent study like the university without walls movement, for instance. Both the need for discipline ,study for specific useful purposes and the drive towards student autonomy have paved the way for wider recognition of distance education, which appears to be an effective tool in the educational enterprise. The term open and distance learning reflects both the fact that all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone who is away from the learner, and that the purpose is to include greater dimensions of openness and flexibility, whether in terms of access, curriculum or other elements of structure. Open and distance learning systems can usually be described as made up of variegated aspects such as the mission or goal of a particular system, programs and curricula, teaching/learning strategies and techniques, learning material and resources, communication and interaction, support and delivery systems, students, tutors, staff and other experts, management, housing and equipment, and evaluation.

Open University

Now we come to the Indian link with regard to the sociological understanding of distance education. A high rate of illiteracy, rising population and the high cost of conventional education were some of the important factors in the launching of distance education in India. In view of the national priorities to provide a second chance to school dropouts, out of school, youth and adults, and an effective alternative to formal education for those who are coming out of adult literacy and non-formal education programmes, the CBSE set up an open school in 1979. From a modest start in the first year, the enrolment increased from 1674 to about 10,000 in the mid 1980s. And now it is one of the largest schooling systems in the world with more than 4 lakh students enrolled in open schools, as per statistical reports till 2014-15 provided by the Ministry of Education's wing of National Institute of Open Schools(NIOS).The Open University had been started in 1982 in Andhra Pradesh and later on IGNOU in Delhi, followed by many similar setups in other states. Their establishment was triggered by the government's intention to democratise education and provide what was intended to be lifelong learning, with respect to higher educational needs, for families in India where children are a valuable asset as income earners or home tenders, the rigidities of the formal school proved to be a major hurdle to their educational mobility. It provides innovative, need based, as well as continuing education to all, including tribal located in far flung areas, for their educational and professional upgradation. Practising a flexible and open educational system, it is currently serving the cumulative strength of more than 3 million learners through 21 Schools of Studies, 67 RCs and around 1,961 Learner Support Centres across the country with the empanelled academic counsellors in excess of 35,300 drawn from conventional higher educational institutions, professional organizations, industries etc(Nayak et al,2020)

Taking the Open University model as an ideal type of distance education project, one could critically analyse the long term significance of this type of university as an educational venture. Perhaps a more workable multimedia teaching approach on a larger scale, needs to be devised. The work of Consortium for Educational Communication(CEC) which is a premier body entrusted with the task of disseminating e-content, merits mention here. It could be used as a template for how distance education can bridge the gap between rural and urban as well as even curb the flow of migrations towards urban centres of learning. Industrial houses need to be given incentives for engaging with and promoting distance education possibilities in remote areas. One could argue that the social structure of Indian society and its relative technological lag, if not backwardness, makes distance education a conceptually fragile model at the operationalising stage.

Social Inequality

Looking at Indian society, one could agree with what Andre Beteille (1984) had expressed with regard to the prevalence of social inequality in various types of societies. The idea of hierarchy and social inequality is so deeply embedded in our Indian social system whether it be through determinants of caste, class or gender that it is impossible to perceive of a universally applicable distance education model of education. The intersectional way our society is stratified, especially with regard to high status being accorded to some castes, lower ranked castes would have found it very difficult to break the glass ceiling. As far as the economic structure is also concerned, we cannot ignore the vast distance between the very rich and the very poor. Has distance education been able to reach out to the economically deprived sections of society (like laborers, daily wage workers, landless farmers, young children of sex workers, transgenders etc)?

As an add on phenomena, the predominance of hierarchical values and normative practices has implications for the society as a whole. Traditional values creep into modern organizations and distort the very ends which they are designed to achieve. In a situation like this, education has a massive task ahead of eradicating these deep rooted values which calls for the cooperation of people(educationists, social workers, politicians, bureaucrats, businessmen etc.) within the society. Taking the technological aspect of distance education, we do know that access and exposure to the mass media computers and networks are still quite limited in India even in semi urban areas, leave aside the rural belts. This has been exposed in the current pandemic where conventional education institutes, be they schools, or colleges had to go online for their sustainable needs. Many students were unable to access seamless communication, due to either non availability of devices, networks or even familial willingness to accommodate this intrusion of their spaces. The possibility of invisibility as far as social and publicly shared spaces are concerned, has been a great equaliser as far as distance education model is concerned.

Prospects

Distance education, has the immense task of changing the traditional value system. Without a doubt, these objectives are intended at least for the universal good of society, especially the marginalised sections. Latently, however, they may be serving the purpose of a few privileged sections of the same society, thereby strengthening their domination over the mass of illiterates. It is clear, it has all the potential of offering high quality education not only to limited number of students but to many others who would otherwise not have

access or availability of conventional modes. It is also obvious that in a country of India's magnitude and diversity, the conventional pattern cannot meet the educational needs and demands of its growing population. Therefore, the significance and inevitability of distance education for the disadvantaged sections of society cannot be undermined. More often than not, a literate parent or adult could be a motivating factor for the child going to school, whereas illiterate parents would be seen as potential if not necessary causes for dropouts, due to their own non exposure to any educational enterprise. So, wider is the availability of doable models of education, greater is the possibility of multiplier effects intergenerationally.

Education, especially distance education has a great role to play in order to create awareness about population control and its immense necessity for our development in any sphere. An educational system only reflects the realities of its larger social economic environment. While education helps in social transformations, it is itself determined by social realities. The democratization of education often remains an illusion if inequalities and privileges are built into the functioning and values of the social economic system. Disparity in knowledge and information reinforces the condition for exploitation and such disparity is the stock reality of the contemporary Indian social reality. Our country, being largely an agrarian structured one would be, it would be quite apt to say that the land relations in our country are intertwined with its social stratification parameters besides economic and political dimensions. Eventually, education and its access plus mode gets affected by the same. Providing education to the distant learner is gradually becoming an accepted policy of many governments. The basic objective is to make education available to those who are *denied and deprived*, which is being implemented by establishing open universities and other distance education institutions. It could be open school, school of correspondence courses, open universities all over the world. Though the nomenclature and objectives may vary from country to country, one would have to agree that the idea of distance education has gained momentum and acceptability. Throughout the world, this is more so when the desire for knowledge and demand for degrees is universal, whereas the resources with governments to establish and run the conventional type of universities are quite limited.

II. Limitations

However, there are a number of challenges of distance education models, which need to be addressed. Distance education is still considered in some countries to be a second rate education, which is meant for second chance learners and does not enjoy the reputation and status that should be accorded for the services it is rendering. This has been observed more in the case of such systems which are working as parallel systems and awarding independent certificates. However some countries do accord equal status to the degrees of conventional and distance education system. Besides the socio economic lines of division, the cultural gap that exists between the urban and the rural, the tribal and the non-tribal men and women in our society has also to be taken into consideration. Regional differences like those who come from north east or southern parts of the country also need empathetic consideration. One of the basic assumptions of distance education is that in a poverty stricken nation education which is not within the reach of a common man, is made available through home study programs, which are not suitable to the existential realities of those for whom eking out daily existence, in terms of food and shelter takes predominance, over any educational pursuits. Keeping this point in mind, the effectiveness of instruction through distance teaching will be relevant only when it is provided efficiently and at the lowest possible cost. Another assumption in such a model is the presence of a high level of technology which may be taken for granted in Western societies. But to think of a multimedia setup including telephones, videos, television, etc at such a massive scale is quite unimaginable in the Indian setup, despite the massive technological leaps that the country has taken. Taking other assumptions like separation of learner and teacher or privatization of the learner in a society where the use of medium may itself pose a hindrance to learning because of lack of proper knowledge. Separating the main motivating agent that is, the teacher may increase the distance between teaching and learning than its manifest purpose of decreasing the same.

The reach and coverage of radio and television is undoubtedly very extensive, but relatively small proportion of the population can afford a receiver or what is known as network services in today's times. Even access to the print medium is limited because of the low literacy levels and lack of interest in reading, where electronic media and visual images have taken over peoples everydayness. A poor transport system in rural and other geographically inaccessible area, and, a woefully inadequate purchasing power of the masses aggravates matters even more. A poor transport system in rural and other geographically inaccessible area and a woefully inadequate purchasing power of the masses. Communications is a sadly neglected arena in our country and this is particularly true of the telephone and network system.

Different modes, different treatment

One of the problems faced by Distance Education students is that they are not treated at par with students coming from conventional educational practices of the face to face kinds. They are sometimes even perceived as not being as meritorious as others for high level posts in India.. Hopefully, technological advances

as well as evolved perceptions would continue to open opportunities for greater acceptance of distance education. Although higher education institutions are changing to favour distance education, the complexities of major transformations will require patience. Bates had suggested that perhaps one of the biggest challenges in distance education was the lack of vision and the failure to use technology strategically (Bates 2000).

Some of the questions that need to be addressed include how distance education is different from conventional education in terms of methods, content, goals and objectives, functions, use of medium, etc. Given all the challenges, is it important to have a distance education model? Another point of query could be pertaining to attempts made towards replicating the distance education model of another country to the social reality of our own kinds. Given its many constraints, does distance education lessen the social distance of people vis-a-vis their culture, language, economic disparities etc too? Another point that merits attention is whether an integrated model would not be more feasible for our society than a purely conventional/face to face one. Some questions become pertinent here. How is distance education different from conventional education? Second, is it an improvement over conventional education? Is it an appropriate model for the Indian context? Does distance education lessen the social distance amongst people? Will an integrated model not be more suitable? And now, post Covid, with many Universities and schools becoming online skilled, what would be the difference between distance and conventional education.

Distance education is not going to serve its manifest function of reaching out to the masses unless it is given the same stature as face to face education. Plus, given the cultural heterogeneity and social economic disparities of Indian society, distance education is not going to equalise educational opportunities unless proactive efforts are made by governmental as well as nongovernmental bodies to facilitate inclusivity and transparency. A yawning gap may persist between the intention and practice, unless some clear cut incentives are offered by the corporate world as well as government bodies.

Besides, we need to make distance education relevant to the available employment opportunities within the country. It is in this respect that a sociological analysis of distance education is very significant to the needs of our times, because conceptualising or implementing a model would be a futile exercise. If it is not related to a particular social context it would be a waste of effort especially if we were to merely borrow any model from outside and try to apply it to our own society. The fact that it has been a success in United Kingdom or any other country does not necessarily warrant its credibility while application in another nation. In a country like India, for instance, we have seen that distance education has not really been much of a departure from correspondence education in the past many decades. A country where values and norms are so deep rooted vis-a-vis caste religion, language, gender relationships and ethnicity, the challenge would be to transcend these barriers and uniformly apply a model which requires community effort plus a general willingness to accept difference without any stereotypical evaluations about each other. This would involve not only individual motivations, absence of petty competition, but even group driven efforts to identify with the national project of what distance education model aims to do. Undoubtedly, the educational needs and aims of our society differ from another.

The way forward

To decrease the distance between knowledge and learners the significance for the use of communication media has been felt to be immense. Distance education meant to be a synthesis between education and communication media helps to disperse the learners over much greater distances than would be possible with conventional education.

In this paper attention has been focused on distance education with special reference to adults. Distance education has been seen to have certain characteristic components which have been missing in the conventional setup, namely separation of learner and teacher, learner and learner, subsequent privatization of the learner and the use of technical media which make distance education different from conventional education. We contend that without an empirical study, it may be difficult to establish that distance education is an improvement over conventional education. However theoretically speaking, given the added multimedia dimensions of distance education, we may infer that it would certainly have a greater accessibility in terms of numbers than conventional education.

Although to what use or interest or value distance educational techniques may actually be put, especially in the job market is another point of query for us as social scientists. As a stand-alone model is distance education an appropriate one for the Indian context? One may like to think it is appropriate or feasible to a certain extent. Distance education offers immense hope. Its potential of lessening the social, physical and cultural distance is also immense because of its ability to integrate the largely heterogeneous society. It may be easier to eliminate prejudices through a comparatively objective media print or broadcast than when a classroom teacher is interested and trusted. To take up the job of teaching children of diverse social and cultural backgrounds which may clash with the interests or values of his own social backgrounds. However, instead of this distance of languages, regions, religions, caste class, gender etc becoming less there is every possibility of a reinforcement of certain dominant group interests taking place.

Integrated Model

It is because of this that one needs to acknowledge the need for an integrated model being a more practical and sustainable proposition. In a situation like ours the conventional and distance education models need to complement each other rather than work as alternate models. The idea of hybrid education that is being proposed now, post covid realities, is what should have been the intention as well as practice, right from the start of distance education models, in a country like ours. The values customs and deep rooted norms need to be changed and it would have to be a two way process. Between education and social traditions where the media could play a major role in approaching the masses of their irrational beliefs and values what is actually called for is a nationwide mass movement of sorts where a committed leadership is absolutely essential. A strong political will and its expression into governmental action with a robust and sustainable financial support is perhaps the need of the hour. What we really require is an involvement of students, teachers professionals, government servants, social workers, business houses and their cooperation plus their collaboration with media persons of the country. Besides the use of television videos, radios, print packages, etc, student contact programs are very essential for inculcating the requisite motivation for distance education. To make headway in the country even institutions, educational and industrial could adopt villages and towns in their attempts to eradicating illiteracy, and this could be supplemented with governmental efforts. The 'each one teach one program' could be made a reality if students, teachers and other educated adults are given the right incentives and motivation.

Despite almost half the population being women, there is a wide gender disparity in the literacy rate in India. It is indicated that census provided a positive indication that growth in female literacy rates 11.8% was substantially faster than in male literacy rates 6.9% in the 2001–2011, which shown the gender gap appears to be narrowing. Issues affecting women include poverty, health, domestic violence, divorce and marriage break up, cross border trading and economic hardships being evident in both rural and urban. There is a gradual increase from 2009-10 onwards. Secondary sources of data reveals that 40 to 50 percent of the students of the majority of the open and distance education institutions are women (Tripathi, 2019)

Need for attitudinal change

What is required is a remodelling of the existing framework where an attitudinal change right from the grassroots level is also required. A cultural ethos based on honesty, integrity, and commitment to work needs to be encouraged. At the level of practising distance education, specific subjects should be allotted to specific areas where the suitability of the subjects is given precedence instead of the objective of disseminating knowledge only, which ought to be related to their daily or functional needs. For instance, in fertile areas of Punjab, farmers could be taught about new breakthroughs in agriculture would be directly relevant to their means of living. This could be done through video films, radio talks, television interviews which would see to their basic survival and even business interests.

Again, in coastal areas, subjects like oceanography, ecology, fishing skills could be taken up. This would make the practical feasibility of distance education far more feasible than mere education from printed matter written in different times and meant for different contexts. One has not conceptualised distance education to be an alternative to conventional education. With a constant give and take process between the two, learners would have the freedom to choose between conventional and distance education methods, with the guarantee that both would have an equal status in the job market. Unless the degrees awarded in both systems are given equal precedence we do not see how the correspondence education, which has been the larger prevalent form of distance education in India, could possibly become popular and relevant amongst the masses. Besides this, the course curriculum chosen for distance education, would need to be more local need oriented as mentioned earlier than has been the case in conventional setups. We appreciate the need to open education to the deprived sections of society and this again can only be achieved if we remove the structural rigidities in our educational system. And integrate the latter with developments in communications technology, which is what our ideal notion of a successful distance education model would be. However, We also believe that if distance education is allowed to be treated as having lesser value to conventional education, then the very purpose of implementing change and innovating the system of education would be defeated. And we would be unable to give any purposeful direction to our education. We would merely have prided ourselves in having discovered a comparatively economic method of imparting education to the weaker deprived and neglected sections of the society.

As per UGC admission details of students enrolled in Distance Education programmes at Undergraduate and Post-Graduate level during the year 2018-19, more than 17 lacs of students were pursuing courses through distance mode.

III. Conclusion: An enabling and empowering model

To conclude, distance education can enable and empower. Those who want to concentrate on their creative skills or pursue full time interests in sports at national as well as international levels would be able to continue with their educational pursuits too. Women who get married or have had to abandon their educational journeys midway due to domestic responsibilities or parenthood, would find distance education as a much needed golden opportunity. Professionals who want to enhance their basic degrees to be upwardly mobile in their corporate careers as well as those who wish to spend more time in competitive exam preparations would be finding distance education offers of upgrading their qualifications, quite appealing. Undoubtedly, distance education is also one of the most pocket friendly pursuits for getting oneself equipped in various skills. Last but not the least, there would have to be collaborative engagements with the industrial sector for institutionalising any well formulated policy of distance education. It cannot be left to the governments alone, to operationalise such a multi-pronged and wide ambit project.

To finally summarise, we need to observe that distance education is a construction of social reality. That is, it is deeply connected to and would be impacted by the various contexts and consumers it is targeted towards. Relevant and appropriate courses should be administered rather than blindly follow other international models which may not match with the socio economic parameters of our country. Plus, a robust multimedia set up has to be an essential component of any distance education template. Frequent personal contact programs would need to be encouraged. Besides other incentives, that is, job opportunities would also have to be made available simultaneously. There should be close cooperation between the conventional and distance education universities, especially as regards the former letting the latter use their infrastructural facilities. It is important to understand that instructional methods, access to technology and adequate support mechanisms are imperative for the operationalising of a successful distance education initiative. Those who conceptualised the idea of distance education intended to use the best available technology to open educational opportunities to people who were unable to attend the regular conventional institutions.

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Dr. Achla Pritam Tandon. "Distance Education in India: some reflections." *IOSR Journal of Research & Method in Education (IOSR-JRME)*, 11(5), (2021): pp. 61-67.