Open and Distance Learning (ODL):
Quest for Social Justice beyond Access

Theme: Social Justice
Sub-theme: Access to Justice: Life, Liberty & Livelihood

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INTRODUCTION

Course correction steered by out-of-the-box thinking, far from the sickeningly dominant business-as-usual attitude, is imperative, should higher education in general and open and distance learning (ODL) in particular achieve social justice in terms of human development, i.e., improving the quality of life of people. Radical changes in such areas as governance, administration/management, funding patterns, faculty hiring, curriculum framing including instructional design and learner support systems, etc., therefore, are warranted in the context of ODL to make it sufficiently robust in order to be increasingly responsive to the learning needs of the society in which it operates. Are we prepared for, or at the least, inclined towards radical changes? With the emerging geopolitical scenario; ever-increasing digital societies that serendipitously flatten the world; emergence of new economic superpowers in the global South, etc., and their impact on demography, culture and particularly higher education, ODL has to, of necessity, come under the reformist scalpel to flush out some of its burdensome traditions.

Making education accessible is one thing, making quality education accessible is quite another, and it is the latter that will complement the social justice exercise undertaken in the education sector with the advent of the ODL in India about half a century ago. It is in this context that the paper urges all the stakeholders concerned to interpret social justice, as it pertains to ODL, against a broad canvass of quality human development, of which access is but a part.

THE QUESTION OF ACCESS

Across the ODL spectrum, a primitive interpretation of social justice seems to historically prevail. Considering the fact that ODL was, by and large, conceived more as a vehicle for accelerating the access to tertiary/higher education than as a system with huge potential to deepen the quality of higher education while simultaneously widening the access, particularly in the context of the developing economies of the world, a broader interpretation of social justice insofar as ODL is concerned did not occur. Thus, ODL has been and unfortunately continues to be associated with access or quantity, and in the process the issue of quality was relegated to the background.

Though indisputably important, access alone is not enough to achieve social justice in terms of equity – quality of learning and quality of life. That is to say, the enthusiasm to improve the access to higher education will prove to be misplaced, if it is shorn of quality and, by extension, human development that singularly determines the degree of social justice achieved. This exactly is the reason why ODL systems, particularly in India, conjure up an unenviable image of mediocrity among the enlightened. More often than not, the major stakeholders such as the government, the academia, the employment market, etc., see them as a manifestation of institutionalized mediocrity.

Besides the abysmally poor performance of some of the institutions that embark on ODL systems with the primary purpose of generating revenue, the other main reason for looking down upon ODL is the 'culturally induced bias' that on-campus education is superior because the physical contiguity that exists between the learners and teachers encourages learning. The impact of this deep-rooted myth is such that it is not uncommon to preposterously apply quality parameters that are pertinent to on-campus environments on ODL. Indicators of quality should, by all means, reflect the quintessence of the system under consideration. Based on the familiarity with the classroom education, the customary standards such as the physical plant (campus), number of faculty members, learning environment, resources such as playground, Internet/Wi-fi connectivity,

physical/digital library, audio/visual studio, cafeteria, etc., the status of council members, teacher-learner ratio, annual learner intake and exit rate, effectiveness of parent-teacher association, on-campus discipline, etc., that are used to gauge the quality or otherwise of the conventional educatrion system are unabashedly applied in the context of ODL. Does one size fit all?

This should not be, however, construed that the on-campus parameters of quality could not be used at all in the ODL context. What is actually meant is that the degree of application differs and that on-campus parameters alone are insufficient to ascertain the quality or otherwise of the ODL systems. Conversely, in their enthusiasm to be treated on a par with the classroom education, ODL institutions often fashion their programmes after those available face-to-face. This is quite unfortunate for obvious reasons: the properties of chalk and cheese remain what they are, packaging notwithstanding. However, the academic benefits that could accrue by dovetailing these systems cannot be disputed. With the emerging information and communications technologies (ICT), a sense of fusion or convergence of these systems has already been sporadically achieved, and the resultant robustness of the products and services ably addresses the issue of social justice.

TRADITIONAL DEFAULTERS

Adding to the element of culturally induced bias, as mentioned earlier, are the habitual offenders, i.e., the ODL institutions that pay lip servicing to instructional design, learner services, etc. As the ODL practices of these institutions leave much to be desired, they tend to strengthen the view that the system could, at best, be substandard. A majority of those seeking education at a distance, for whatever reasons, tends to approach it only with this mindset. The 'what' of the system, i.e., its inherent potential, gets obfuscated, while the 'how' of it, i.e., the way it has been put to practice, determines the world view. What worth is the intent, if it is not translated into action?

Lack of political will as represented by government apathy towards ODL encourages the offenders. Yet another factor is the government spending on higher education and research. This has been less than 2% of the gross domestic product (GDP). On the one hand, institutions of higher learning suffer from dwindling government funding which they used to enjoy traditionally, irrespective of whether or not they are any productive. So used to the unflinching financial support from governments of the day without the concomitant responsibility and accountability, on the other hand, institutions are historically maimed to generate funds from such activities as research, consultancy, etc. Hands in gloves, thus, it appears that both the government and the academia promote ODL as an alternative mechanism to generate revenue with the sole purpose of sustaining the conventional system of education. Incredible, this may sound, but is there any other way of looking at the current scenario when the country eminently fails to tap the potential of ODL for providing inclusive quality education?

QUEST FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

About half a century ago, when ODL was introduced in its earliest avatar as correspondence education in India, the purpose seemed to be to provide continuing education to teachers as well as to increase the access to higher education. With the emergence of open learning in the 1980s, the access angle also gained currency and it was projected in the successive Five Year Plan documents that each Indian State would have an Open University and that the share of distance learners in the GER by 2012, i.e., by the end of the 12th Five Year Plan (2007-2012), should be about 40%, etc. Thus, 'access' was predominant in the ODL discourse in India, and, perhaps, rightly so, as the prevailing situation warranted so. However, with the phenomenal growth of the ICT since the mid-1990s and the whole new perception this brought with it on every aspect of life including education, the quest for quality and, by extension, access for success is beginning to dominate the ODL scene. Mere access to higher education, as it obtains today, turns out to be a politically correct populist measure, but access without paving the way for improving the quality of life is socially and economically unproductive. If the earlier discussion on the use of ODL for revenue generation is of any indication, even the note-worthy access angle becomes subservient to finance.

The apathetic approach of the government towards ODL (and therefore that of the ODL providers) could be attributed to the lack of a genuine roadmap to achieve social justice, i.e., improving the access to quality higher education and quality of life. A few questions of the kind given below beg convincing answers in this context:

- Are the law/policy makers still groping in dark?
- Could this be a case of wantonness on the part of the government?
- Does this smack of a subversive attempt to perpetuate class distinction?
- Isn't it advantageous for the government to spend less without losing its control?

The way the legislature, bureaucracy, judiciary and press/media deal with the ODL system of education tempts one to strongly believe that these have been guided chiefly by anecdotal knowledge of the system. In short, the

country as a whole seems to have paid scant attention, if any, to the issue. Blinded by their own perception of the system, many see ODL as they wish it to be like the Proverbial Blinds. Though a number of instances could be listed to substantiate it, a few illustrative ones are given below for consideration:

- When grandiose proposals have been made for establishing n-number of institutions of higher learning including colleges, centres of excellence, etc., on a huge budget outlay, to double the GER in about 5 years hence, law makers tend to be amnesiac about ODL. It was projected in the reports of the now defunct National Knowledge Commission (NKC) that the country needs 1500 universities to close the gap between the demand and supply in the higher education sector. And, the Government added a number of universities, institutes of technology, management, science, etc. Capital and other costs involved in these exercises are obviously prohibitive, as are the time and human resources. If the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) could cater to about 3 million learners within 25 years of its establishment and the Tamil Nadu Open University (TNOU) more than 250,000 learners within less than 7 years of its existence, which almost equals the number of learners the Open University at the United Kingdom (UKOU) has under its wing over a span of 4 decades, *are there problems in improving the access to higher education through ODL?* Even assuming that there are 1500 universities at this point in time, what could possibly be the total number of students they can collectively accommodate? And, granting that we have enough funds to set up the required number of institutions of higher learning and research, what could be the time-line within which they should become fully operational? Land acquisition, hiring of human resources, etc., are not easy. The promises thus are nothing short of pulling the wool over one's eyes. One could, however, raise the issue of quality in the ODL offerings. Quality is not something that resides in any product or process, it is what we create. For example, in 2004, the UKOU (Open University of the United Kingdom) was rated 4 - one rank above the world-renowned Cambridge University - in the list of top 10 universities in the UK. Quality is therefore not impossible in ODL, if only there is a will! With proper policies and regulatory mechanisms, ODL could easily fulfil the higher education wishes of the country. Couldn't then the grandiose educational projects of the government have room for ODL?

- The allocation for higher and technical education has been raised 9-fold from a little more than $ 2 billion in the 10th Plan to $18 billion in the current 11th Plan. This is to create 16 central universities, 14 world class universities, 370 colleges in lower GER districts, 8 Indian Institutes of Technology, 7 Indian Institutes of Management, 10 National Institutes of Technology, 20 Indian Institutes of Information Technology, 6 Indian Institutes of Science Education and Research, 2 SPS and 50 centres for training and research in frontier areas. The Planning Commission has estimated that a total of about $56 billion would be required for implementation of these projects. So, there will be a resource gap of about $38 billion. Together with this, another about $20 billion would be required for setting up 200 new universities during the 11th Plan Period. This adds up to a resource gap of about $60 billion. During the 11th Plan Period (2007-2012), close to $18 billion has been allocated for education. Assuming that this trend will continue during the 12th Plan Period (2012-2017) as well, about $40 billion would be spent on education during the decade beginning 2007. But, the Ministry of Human Resources Development (MHRD) puts the estimate at $400 billion – a 10-fold increase from what could be allocated. Where will the government get the money from? Since the Kothari Commission's report on education in the 1950s, the recommendation for government spending on education has been to the tune of 6% of the GDP. But this still remains a pipedream. What prevents the government from taking recourse to ODL in this scenario?

- In one Province/State of India, it was declared that those who earned a first degree through ODL without having 12 years of prior schooling would not be considered for employment in the government. However, those who do not have the 12-year schooling but possess a first degree, after having successfully completed an additional 6-month bridging programme, are considered eligible for employment at the national level. Access to higher education, thus, gets mutilated, leave alone 'success'. A classic example for social injustice in the ODL context, indeed!

- In their enthusiasm to sensationalize the issue referred to above, the Press/Media declare that the degrees of the State's Open University are of no value. If the government's stand with particular reference to the compulsory number of years of schooling is dogmatic enough, the Press/Media suggest a blanket ban on the programmes of the University. Such is the indifference of the press/media that they fail to pay attention to the plethora of programmes that the University offers across a wide range of disciplines, in addition to the ones which do not require formal schooling.

- Both the government and the Press/Media draw support for their declarations about ODL from the judiciary, when convenient. Admission into master level programmes without a first degree was seen by the Court of Law as inappropriate but seems to allow retention of jobs/promotions of staff on the basis of such master level programmes as well as permits those who may have acquired a first degree subsequently to practice law. As the judiciary means what it is, insulated by the contempt of court provisions, questioning it, however

lopsided in such matters, is rare. Judging the judges is simply unthinkable in the Indian context. That said, the attempt here is not to make a value judgement on the appropriateness or otherwise of allowing admission into master level programmes without a first degree. This is to point to the ignorance that exists in the judiciary that conveniently takes recourse to what is prevalent and existent, as its wont.

If the foundation of the pillars of democracy – the Executive, the Legislature, the Judiciary and Press – is weak vis-à-vis education in general and ODL in particular, as could be deduced from the narration above, the gap between education for the classes and for the masses will remain. Unless education is seen beyond its traditionally caricatured boundary of information/knowledge creation by some and its dissemination to many, which by itself may not be impertinent though, achieving inclusive quality education will remain a slogan, or at best, rhetoric. Without quality education and without quality education reaching all those who need it, no country can aspire for economic and social prosperity. By extension, mere economic prosperity does not subsume social prosperity. When the former is skewed and does not percolate to the masses, the latter cannot be expected. To achieve an even economic prosperity and the resultant social prosperity, what could be better than inclusive quality education?

REFLECTIONS

In a vicarious way, ODL addresses itself to the 'bottom of the pyramid' - a concept propounded by the legendary management guru C.K. Prahalad that revolutionalized the field of marketing management. Though this concept does connote 'mass', dilution of quality of products, processes and services was neither intended nor contemplated. This cannot, however, be said of ODL. Nonetheless, it is not impossible for open and distance learning institutions (ODLIs) to build and maintain quality of their offerings by periodically overhauling curricula; re-drawing staff development activities; carrying out relevant research studies; making available quality learner support services, etc. For example, they could embark on multifarious learning environments to cater to differing learning styles, bring relevant and current information/knowledge to the doorsteps of learners, address the learning needs of the differently-abled, etc., by harnessing the potential of technologies including information and communications technologies (ICT). With the world community fiercely embracing Free/Open Source Software (FOSS), Open Educational Resources (OERs), etc., ODLIs could extend a helpful arm to deeply bury the clichéd digital divide arguments and bring to life the hitherto dormant phenomenon of digital dividend. The proposition put forward may smack of contradiction, but the fact remains that the problems created by technology could be solved only by technology.

Wriggling out of the stereotypical academic trap, which many of the existing ODL institutions currently find themselves in, they must reflect on their social contributions and make concerted efforts to re-invent themselves, and the resultant new avatar should ably address the issues of social justice beyond access. However, the role of ODLIs in bringing about social justice in education is limited, though sufficiently important. Granting that ODLIs could bring forth positive changes within their environments to meet the demands of social justice, what worth would they still be, if they continue to receive flak out of socio-political apathy? ODLIs, in isolation, cannot achieve social justice: they need to carry with them the entire social milieu in which they operate.

Ably addressing the issues of socio-political apathy, academic credibility, etc., thus, becomes imperative, and this could not be done without intense engagement of the pillars of democracy. This, when occurs, will result in robust ODL policies, achieving inclusive quality higher education and thus social justice.