

# Role of Open and Distance Learning in empowerment of backward communities in India

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The development of any nation depends on its educational system and it is proved that education is the key to human progress and social change. Education is a powerful tool for empowerment of individual. It helps in developing confidence in individual and community about their own capacities, inherent strengths to shape their lives and thus enhance the inner strength- intellectual, political, social and economic against oppression, exclusion and discrimination.

Empowerment is the enhancement of the political, social, economic or spiritual strength of individuals and communities. Empowerment envelops developing and building capacities of individuals, communities to make them part of the main stream society. Education is the means by which societies have been known in history, to grow out of oppression to democratic participation and involvement. It is a powerful tool for empowerment of individual. It is intrinsic to human personality. It carries both intrinsic as well as instrumental values.

If look back in to the history of India, education was never in reach of its entire people. Unequal access to education has been rampant in India. Discriminatory order in the caste system has been instrumental in perpetuating this. Over the generations one section of the society were enjoyed the fruits of the education and remaining majority of Indian communities particularly marginalized sections like Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC), Religious Minorities and Women were denied the opportunity. Right since Jotirao Phule, Narayan Guru, early education movements to present day, education campaigns all are non-Brahmin in origin and they strongly believe that 'education is enlightenment and enlightenment is empowerment'. It helps to make for a better future society.

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar (1989) recognized the importance of education in shaping the future and cautioned the under-

privileged not to lose any opportunity to get that right, and said "We may forego material benefits, but we cannot forego our right and opportunities to reap the benefit of the highest education to the fullest extent." He put all his efforts to guarantee the educational opportunities without any discrimination to all the citizens of independent India. But after 57 years of its implementation, political order and the ruling elite of this country could not succeed in providing access to the "right to education" to its people.

In this background the paper briefly touches the present scenario of Higher Education in the context of globalization and examines the role of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system in democratizing the education in India. The paper further assesses the impact of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Open University, the first Open University in India in terms of empowering the learners in expanding their livelihoods. The study is based on the periodical review reports of the University and field based research done by the Center for Social Empowerment of the University, where the researcher is associated.

## GLOBALIZATION AND HIGHER EDUCATION:

In the post-Independence era, the Indian higher Education has adopted both American and British models to meet the challenges. Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) for instance, consciously patterned after the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the U.S. Similarly Indian Institutes of Management (IIM), Ahmenabad, for example, still maintains strong connections with the Harvard Business School. In the series, the recent innovation in Indian higher education is Open University system which built on the UK experience with ODL model. All these models and systems helped to modernise and liberalize Indian education system which led to universalisation and democratization of the teaching learning process.

The present day Globalization has given rise to many

dichotomies in the Indian higher education system. Socially backward obviously economically weak will be further marginalized in the market oriented model. The private and foreign institutions may provide better quality of education, but with high cost, which is not affordable to majority. No doubt, this will be an advantageous to few 'elite' in the society who comes from upper strata, who can meet the financial conditions of such education, at the same time the poor and marginalized minority groups are deprived from this benefit.

### MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES AND EDUCATION IN INDIA:

Indian constitution recognizes socially marginalized communities based on the Caste they belong to. On the basis of caste, Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC) and the religious minorities, and also women are marginalized in the field of education. According to census of India 2001, the total population of SC account for 16.2% of Indian population, ST account for 8.1% of the total. Though there is no official head count for OBCs the National Surveys suggest that the population of OBCs form 41% of the population.

As the Census 2001 has not yet brought out the data on the literacy rate of SCs and STs, it is not possible to assess the progress during the last decade. However, literacy data by social group are available from the 55th Round of National Sample Survey (NSS), which was conducted just 7 months before the Census, 2001. As per NSS, 55th round, the literacy rate of SCs in rural India was 46.6%. In urban India, the literacy rate was 66.2%. The literacy rate of ST population was 42.2% in rural areas, and in urban areas, it was 70%. The literacy rate of Other Backward Class (OBC) was 54.8% in rural India. In urban India, the literacy rate of OBC was 75.3%. The enrolment of SCs up to Class 8 was 19.87%; for STs it was 10.69%. Among OBCs, the figures were 42% in the primary classes and 41.23% at the upper primary level.

Government data on the Muslim community's enrolment in schools, collected for the first time, confirms what the Sachar Committee (2006) report indicated about their educational status. The findings showed that Muslims were the most educationally backward community in the country. Comprising nearly 13% of India's population, Muslim enrolment at the primary school level (Class 1-5) was a meager 9.39% of total enrolment figures for 2006-07.,

The national educational policy (1986) stressed the need of the liberalization of education to liberate marginalized sections of the society. The policy recommended for the use of distance education media in a massive way to reach those un-reached. A large majority of our people SC/ ST's, backward classes, Women and physically disabled remained

for reaching out of educational institutions. Distance education provides them with new avenue for getting education (Hemalatha, 1992). To realize the mission 'education for all' India launched its ODL system in the early 80s.

### OPEN UNIVERSITY-EDUCATION AT THE DOOR STEP

The establishment of the first Open University, Andhra Pradesh Open University (renamed later as Dr B. R. Ambedkar Open University) in 1982 in Hyderabad, of Andhra Pradesh, in India has paved the way to establish the open universities in a country. Now, India has a vast network of distance education, apart from 13 Open Universities in different States, India has a National Open University (IGNOU), and 120 dual mode institutions offering distance education programmes in India. One of the main objectives of open and distance education in India is accessibility to all the sections of the society; since 1980, distance education methodologies have been extensively used to provide educational opportunities to a large numbers in the society.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Open University (BRAOU) has proved that the Distance Education is a helping hand for the poor, disadvantaged as well as socially marginalized. In its 25 years history the University has lifted thousands of people from their historical backwardness, suppression and isolation. Providing them a "second chance" to pursue their education for those who could not continue their formal education, BRAOU helping a large segments of the population, in particular the 'disadvantaged groups'. Now the University is in a position to claim proudly that it has created a silent revolution in education in the State. The data presented in the table-01 shows the impact of BRAOU on the empowerment of marginalized sections of Indian society.

Year	Total Enrolment	SC, ST & BC Enrolment	% of SC, ST, BC	Total Women Enrolment	% of Women
1983	6231	2431	31.00	935	15.01
1988	16848	7082	42.00	5346	31.73
1993	29284	15797	53.94	8105	27.62
1998	55208	35263	63.87	14386	26.06
2003	72161	43999	60.97	19146	34.22
2006	62760	42278	67.36		37.00

The University enrolment data reveals that BRAOU's access to the socially marginalized is growing more and more. According to the latest (2006) data SC, ST, OBC constitutes 67.36% of its total enrollments. Among them 20.6% are SCs, around 3 percent more than their population, STs are 6.42% and the remaining 41 % are belongs to OBCs. Apart from the Caste groups Women from all social groups' shares around 37% of the total enrolments.

The characteristic of learning flexibility helped in equity

and equal opportunities in higher education among the diverse social groups, minority communities in India. As the Vice President of India Mr. Hameed Ansari rightly pointed out "Distance education in our country has inherent characteristics that are insufficiently appreciated... distance education is inclusive and encourages marginalized sections of society into the fold of higher education. Addressing the 19th convocation of Indira Gandhi National Open University he pointed out that women make 40percent of distance education students as compared to 28 percent in the conventional mode".

#### **ADVANTAGES OF ODL:**

Open Education is considered as very effective for societies like India, where literacy and education levels are low. More over the system and its features are inclusive in nature. India tried its level best to provide free and compulsory education to all its citizens but it could not achieve its target in the last 60 years of its independence. It becomes a tough task to provide higher education with its limited recourses. In this context the distance education has emerged as an alternative model to the conventional education system.

The first and basic advantage of open education system is the flexibility. The flexibility in terms of time, pace, place, age, occupation certainly gives a new hope and fresh life to thousands of learners who were the victims of the Indian rigid traditional education system. Since the Open University is a learner-centered system, it provides education to large and diverse groups of students in a flexible manner. As far as the qualifications are concerned most of the learners who couldn't able to continue in the formal system, because of socio-economic and cultural reasons have the advantage of Open learning. Further the flexibility of entry into academic programmes irrespective of their age, qualification make the learner to pursue their higher education. In open universities, particularly in Dr.BRAOU students can choose the subjects of study according to their interests. The flexibility in teaching and learning process is also an additional advantage for the learners. Since open learning system in India adopts multi-media approach learner can study the course material, watch audio visual programmes related to their courses in his own pace and place. To seek further help or information they can attend the counseling sessions in nearby study centers during the weekends. This facility helps the learners who work for their livelihoods. The examination and evaluation system also gives greater flexibility for the learners. Thus the Open University system in India came in to existence with a popular slogan "Education at your door step" literally brought higher education closer to the people.

Second important factor for the success of open learning system in India is its Cost effectiveness. Education in the

Open University is cost effective not only to the students but also to the institution. A student can gain while he is earning and learn according to his convenience and interest.

Access in terms of reach, particularly geographical distance is another advantage of ODL. Providing education to all in a country like India in conventional methods is proved as a difficult task because huge population live in a vast geographical regions. In such a situation ODL made the access of higher education simple to the learners through study centers covering all the geographical areas. Thus the flexibility in terms of study, greater access compared to conventional education systems and the multi media teaching learning package and the cost effectiveness attracted millions of people. It resulted in the equity, diversity and inclusiveness with in the society.

#### **CASE STUDIES OF BRAOU**

It is a fact that the Distance education in India has created a silent knowledge revolution by democratizing the higher education with its flexibility, access, and cost-effectiveness. It became a boon for socially marginalized social groups such as Scheduled Castes, Tribes, Other Backward Communities and religious minorities. Further it helped Women who were suppressed for generations and denied educational opportunities. On the eve of the Silver Jubilee year the university has collected Success Stories of its learners to understand what way the University has empowered them. Some case studies are presented here.

##### **Mohamad Yaseen**

A college drop out, Md Yaseen, turned in to a Lecturer and the process was given shape by Dr BR Ambedkar Open University. It was financial problems and his mother's failing health which forced Mohammad Yaseen to leave studies and raise a family. He got married and become father of three children, Yaseen led a hand-to-mouth existence and joined a dispensary assisting the doctor and started earning less than a dollar per month.

He wanted to make his life better; Yaseen approached BRAOU and joined graduation in the first batch in 1983. On Sundays he used to attend Open University classes without fail which were very useful, says Yaseen. Extending his study timings as the exams approached fast, he completed the Degree course by 1987. BRAOU degree was the turning point of Yaseen's life and he was quickly appointed as teacher in Hyderabad. Later he persuaded post graduation and in 2001 he became a lecturer.

##### **Surya Dhananjay Naik**

The girl from a tiny thana (tribal settlement) of Nalgonda

district strode like a colossus on the BRAOU propeller to be the first tribal woman to become an Associate Professor and take a Ph.D. Surya Dhananjay Naik hails from Bhallunaik thanda, a remote hamlet tucked away in the deep hinterlands of Miryalguda which strictly adheres to its own rules set to preserve the inimitable tribal traditions and their unique style of living. Born in one such thanda cocooned with tribal traditions and taboos Surya was ninth of the ten children to their parents. Surya took their community by storm when she first stepped out of their settlement to study in a different thanda and leapt to the rank of Associate Professor besides getting a doctorate and BRAOU stands as the central pillar of her success story.

### Rajendra Prasad

Undeterred by his physical disability and the inevitable dependence on crutches, Rajendra Prasad could scale new heights on the social ladder latching on to one of the many initiatives of Dr BR Ambedkar Open University. Hailing from a Dalit (known as Untouchables in India) their parents had no awareness on polio and he was not vaccinated. This resulted in polio and Prasad's two legs became numb and he was disabled for life. Prasad used to love education wear clippers which do not bend and the school was on a hillock and the class room had no benches to sit on Squatting on ground, it was very difficult to Prasad while getting up. Seeing his plight one of the teachers advised his parents to keep him away from the school. That was the end of Prasad's school life. At the age of 24 Prasad came to know about Open University and took admission in Under Graduation programme. . BRAOU has given Prasad a new lease of life. It provided the real limbs to the handicapped person though nature played foul with him. He started a telephone booth and when things were moving smoothly, the sudden boom of cell phones forced him to shift to a small business to eke out livelihood. Continuing with his hobby, Prasad keeps writing essays and short stories to magazines.

This is the success story of a University bringing new hope by giving a new lease of life among thousands of marginalized people. Not only one, there are 14 such Universities in India channelising the inner skills among the people through distance education and providing sustainable livelihood in a changing world.

**CONCLUSION:** Higher Education is a very powerful agent of social change. If the higher education system is not streamlined or improved according to the needs of the present day, the primary promise of justice- social, economic and political, equality of status and of opportunity, liberty of thought, faith and worship will ever remain unfulfilled. Higher education should aim at socialization and democratization in true sense of the word

It is clearly evident that Open University Education in India is playing a vital role in catering the higher education to the needs of diversified groups of students including socially disadvantaged sections. Marginalised communities in India are suffering with lack of access to education in India for generations. For a quite long time Dalits were not allowed to enter to the doorsteps of educational centers and institutions. With a delightful slogan "Education at your doorstep" the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system in India brought education virtually to the door steps of several disadvantaged sections including Dalits and women. If this system has more accessible the marginalized communities especially Dalits will definitely emancipate themselves from traditional bondages, exploitations and humiliations.

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