Open Learning in Mizoram: Challenges and Prospects in a Digital World

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ABSTRACT

Open learning in India has become quite popular especially after the subsequent development following the National Policy of Education, 1985, which proposed the initiation of an Open University in India. Today, Open learning has benefitted thousands of job seekers as well as those that simply desire to have higher qualification. There are a number of regional centres that caters to the needs of each region. Mizoram has also had its own regional centre since the year 2000 that looks after 9 study centres. With the current switch over from paper to digital communication, there are various speculations regarding how this will ultimately affect open learning, especially in a remote area like Mizoram where digitisation is still very much a novelty. The present paper has tried to give a brief history of open education in India and Mizoram and at the same time speculate how a digital communication system will benefit or harm open learning in the state of Mizoram.

Keywords: Digital, open learning, educational package, distance education, autonomous learning, global competitiveness

Higher education in India has undergone a massive expansion since the time of Independence in 1947 when there were just 19 conventional universities and 700 colleges catering to the whole eligible population in the country. As on the year 2017, the University Grants Commission recognized 47 central universities, 359 state universities, 123 Deemed to be Universities and 260 private universities totaling 789 universities. According to the All India Survey of Higher Education conducted by the Department of Higher Education (DHE), Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of higher education was calculated at 12% to 15% by the end of XI Five Year Plan. However, collection and dissemination of data suffered from incomplete coverage, inordinate time lag etc. Due to this, the calculated percentage may not reflect the correct picture of the country's development in respect of Higher Education sector. Government has set a target of increasing the GER from the present level of about 12% to 15% by the end of XI Five Year Plan to 30% by the year 2020. Although the country is slowly but surely attaining the goal of free education to all children from ages 6 to 14, this right is still quite elusive at the higher education. Higher education is still quite expensive

in India in spite of the government subsidizing it to the utmost. For a large number of the Indian population, higher education still remains out of reach. The only possible course of action is open distance education which supplements mainstream higher education through open universities and centres of distance education located in formal universities. Open learning has now become the main source of self actualization by a number of individuals who cannot afford to enroll themselves in these mainstream universities. Today, UGC recognises 106 such universities that operate within their own territorial jurisdiction providing online courses and even technical and professional courses. However, open universities are largely backed by ICT. In places where there is little access to ICT, Open Universities can and do function but with the help of ICT, communication, an important feature of it, is made easier and education is made much more accessible.

Brief history of open learning in India

Recognising the need for an agency to meet the needs of the population for higher education, academic leaders looked all over for an alternative. A good model was found in the Open University in UK which was established in the year 1968 and academic leaders decided to set up an open learning institute on this model. But it took a while to materialise and it was only in 1982 that open learning was initiated by the then Andhra Pradesh Open University, now Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University in Hyderabad. The university set up its own objectives and functioned on the lines of the Open University in UK. But the most significant step towards open learning was taken by the Government of India in 1985 when the Parliament passed an Act to set up an open university namely the Indira Gandhi National Open University. The Act proves IGNOU with the responsibility at the national level to '*advance and disseminate learning and knowledge by a diversity of means, including the use of any communication technology, to provide opportunities for higher education to a larger segment of the population and to promote the educational well being of the community generally, to encourage the*

Open University and distance education systems in the educational pattern of the country and to coordinate and determine the standards in such systems, and the University shall, in organizing its activities, have due regard to the objects specified in the first Schedule'. It has some major functions, which are to:

- ⊙ Provide access to higher education to all segments of the society;
- ⊙ Offer high-quality, innovative and need-based programmes at different levels, to all those who require them;
- ⊙ Reach out to the disadvantaged by offering programmes in all parts of the country at affordable costs; and
- ⊙ Promote, coordinate and regulate the standards of education offered through open and distance learning in the country.
- ⊙ Achieve the twin objectives of widening access for all sections of society and providing continual professional development and training to all sectors of the economy, the University uses a variety of media and latest technology in imparting education.

From two academic prorgrammes in 1987, this University now serves the educational aspirations of over 3 million students in India and other countries through 21 Schools of Studies and a network of 67 regional centres, around 2,667 learner support centres and 29 overseas partner institutions. The University offers about 228 certificate, diploma, degree and doctoral programmes, with strength of nearly 810 faculty members and 574 academic staff at the headquarters and regional centres and about 33,212 academic counsellors from conventional institutions of higher learning, professional organizations, and industry among others.

As far as increasing coverage is concerned, IGNOU has certainly become the best alternative to conventional higher education by offering access to a large number of aspiring learners.

Open learning in Mizoram

Open learning has made quite a late entry into the state of Mizoram. But it has made its mark in the state and its reach is wide and covers different

sections of the population. The major player here is Indira Gandhi National Open University again although there are several open universities opening off campus centres in the state. IGNOU Regional Centre at Aizawl was activated in December, 2000. The jurisdiction of the Regional Centre extends to whole of Mizoram State. The Regional Centre started functioning with 9 (nine) Study Centres with its bifurcation from Regional Centre Shillong. At present, the IGNOU RC Aizawl delivers its services through 8 (eight) Regular Study Centres, (four) Programme Study Centres and 5 (five) Special Study Centres covering all the districts in the state of Mizoram. The Regional Centre, Aizawl now offers 50 academic programmes and hopes to offer more academic programmes in the near future. Since its inception in Mizoram in 2000, its enrolment has totaled 46282 individuals willing to learn in the distance mode. The Regional Centre is equipped with facilities for instructional interaction through Teleconferencing using Gyan Darshan and EDUSAT channel. It also arranges phone-in-radio counseling programmes on 2nd and 4th Sunday of every month between 4pm to 5pm through AIR Station, Aizawl. It thus caters to the whole of Mizoram without neglecting those isolated from the urban areas.

Digital India Programme

The Digital India Programme is a flagship programme of the Government of India with a vision to transform India into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy. In the words of our Prime Minister Sri Narendra Modi, 'We want to have one mission and target: take the nation forward- digitally and economically'. According to the Digital India Program, there are three vision areas which are:

(i) Digital Infrastructure as a Core Utility to Every Citizen.

(ii) Governance and Services on demand.

(iii) Digital empowerment of citizens.

Under the third vision, we see the following provisions:

⊙ Universal digital literacy

⊙ Universally accessible digital resources

⊙ Availability of digital resources / services in Indian languages

⊙ Collaborative digital platforms for participative governance

⊙ Citizens not required to physically submit government documents and certificates.

It might take some time for this programme to fully mature but the fact that open learning can be an ally and a beneficiary to this programme cannot be ignored. If the provisions are realised, these technological advances will create fantastic possibilities of developing new processes and new ways of communications in open education. On the other hand, a digital world would mean a change in content generation, content storage, content packaging and content delivery. These changes could mean changes for worse for an individual who is not educated in information technology. Therefore, a digital world can be a huge challenge although it is overloaded with prospects for open education.

Challenges to open learning in a Digital World

A digital world will mean a number of changes for higher education in the open mode. Some of these may be discussed as under:

Change in educational package: As stated earlier, open education is already heavily dependent on ICT. But most of the readymade packages are in the form of texts and reference books which can be accessed by any individual who is willing to learn. In other words, the only major difference between open learning and learning in conventional universities is that open learning gives the learner the freedom to not attend lectures. Otherwise, packaging and delivery of courses is the same as that of traditional universities. A digital world could mean a change quite distinct and different from the existing institutions of open learning as perceived today. The question is not about rise in provision of quality educational materials but the ability of the target groups to appreciate such a change.

Broadband connectivity: A digital world would mean a network with broadband connectivity linking hardware and appliances at various places for giving access to anywhere, any time and anyone. Does the state possess this kind of network? In the present scenario, there does not seem to be a direct communication between IGNOU and the state Department of ICT. Without a proper connection between the two, distance learning might not benefit so much in a digital world. In order to operate smoothly, it is not just the Open learning centre but learners who need to possess the right kind of software tools and the knowledge to apply these tools when needed where needed.

In case of Mizoram, the staff are apprehensive about 2017 July entrance which is to be fully digital, making use of the internet. This is because they fear many open learning aspirants may not have the proper internet connection and those who have might not have the knowledge to make use of it. If this is the case, enrolment will certainly go down. The ultimate loser will be the people in the rural area, with no proper internet connection or the ability to apply for online admission. In this case, IGNOU would be a failure regarding one of its objectives which is to reach out to the disadvantaged sections of the society who cannot afford conventional education.

Educational costs: One of the many reasons for the setting up of open learning system was to cut educational costs. If a digital India insists on a fully digital system, the target community should be prepared for such a step. If the target community is missed the whole purpose of digitisation would be missed. This worthwhile endeavour could end up as an impediment to open learning which has for more than ten years, served the society by providing an alternative education to the masses.

Training of teachers and staff: Another challenge would be the training of the teachers and the staff themselves who might be quite ignorant where technology is concerned. The preparation for e-lectures and multimedia materials all need prior training. If the state has an agency for training in these areas, it would be beneficial to open learning,

but if it does not, the human resources would have to be sent outside for training and this could not only eat away a large portion of the financial resources but also take more time than necessary depending on the learners' ability to grasp new technology.

With all these in consideration, open learning could suffer a great deal in a digital world even though it is already IT based to a large extent.

Prospects of open learning in a digital world

One of the major advantages of an IT based education is e-education. According to Ram Takwale, Chairman, Indian Distance Education Association, this education system requires the following framework and infrastructure:

1. Network with latest hardware and technologies along with broadband connectivity and grid architecture giving network access to anyone, anytime, anywhere.
2. Software tools and techniques that enable creation of databases and information flows, offer facilities to learners, teachers and institutions to receive and give personalised education on a mass scale.
3. Content in e-formats on a knowledge grid that enables teachers and students get personalised curriculum of higher quality, relevance and utility.
4. Educational delivery system that ensures quality and developmental relevance of educational offerings for individual, institution and community
5. Quality assurance and certificate mechanism to maintain competitively high and acceptable standards at national and international levels.

If the state is ready for such a system, then open learning is full of prospects in a digital world. It would mean a new world of positive changes. A few of these may be:

Equal access to education for all: A truly digital Mizoram would mean equal access to education for all. There would no longer be any question of

missed opportunity due to isolation. Not only this, it would be possible to provide quality education to all, paving the way for an enlightened Mizoram.

Higher levels of activity and interactivity: A digital world would also mean higher levels of activity and interactivity. The dominant foundation of teaching and learning behaviour in open education is writing and reading teaching texts. But a digital learning environment can considerably intensify the current method of dealing with reality through the use of multimedia systems. According to Prof. Otto Peters, one of the pioneers of distance education, assignments, tests and short contact classes could be replaced by a much more favourable teaching software. The network has the ability to link institutions, libraries and individuals. Continuous contact can be made with this opposite number, and maintained, by using the keyboard, and this contact is integrated in the learning behaviour. Interactivity is heightened in a digital world because students are naturally fascinated and become more willing to learn.

Autonomous learning: An ICT powered open learning system would make independent, self-planned and self-regulated learning easier. We can say that students will have all the information in the world *at the tips of their fingers.* They have access to many relevant data pools and can even use search engines to make this access even more comfortable. This will make open learning even more autonomous because students will be able to learn at their own pace. Besides working at their own pace, students will be able to get access to learning materials from every part of the world, even enabling them to become virtual partners with others students from far away through video-conferencing. This will mean that the learner is not only able to study from the comfort of his room but will be able to choose from a variety of courses.

Cutting the cost of education: There are a lot of problems that surround higher education, and an open education system in a digital world might be the best solution to these problems, especially financial ones. Since it will mean a paradigm shift from the present form, a huge investment is of

course anticipated as stated by our pioneers in open learning. But the result will be a fall in expenses of education that will not be obtained again in a millenium. Since world class education will be available, higher education will cease to become the marketing commodity it has turned out to be.

Solution to developmental disparities: India is a land of developmental disparities and education has been one of the casualties. A digital world would mean a removal of regional imbalances and better support for education of the weaker classes especially women who are barred from entering higher education due to their roles in the family. This way, there will be upliftment of the weaker sections in the society and there will be better job opportunities in the employment market for them.

Global competitiveness: Only a digital open learning system can be truly global in nature, along with its ability to change courses from classical subjects with little value in the commercial world to a model that could link education to developments in society, industry and services sectors. Education of world class quality relevant to local needs of the state would be possible. Open learning will be able to avail of a number of educational resources from the best institutions. This will create a healthy global competitiveness which open learning still cannot boast of in the present day scenario.

CONCLUSION

The age old problems of underdevelopment, poverty, ignorance and disadvantages faced by a young state like Mizoram can be addressed with sound educational system that will not favour just a small section of the society. It is open education that can play this role the best. But in order to make education enjoyable and worth pursuing, it has to be equipped with the right framework and proper infrastructure. Otherwise, like so many unsuccessful attempts that have been made before, digital India might only serve to further frustrate the already frustrated learner. Therefore, let us welcome this new innovation with open arms while preparing ourselves to make the right adjustments in order to create for ourselves a state worthy of praise and respect in the educational field.

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