

# **Distance Education as a Key Factor in Building Literacy in India**

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## **Introduction**

I must at the outset express my most sincere and grateful thanks to the ICDE and its co-organizers for inviting me to deliver this address. Though I feel greatly honoured to be so invited, I must also confess to a sense of awkwardness, especially speaking before such stalwarts in the field of open & distance learning present in this gathering today. I am perhaps the newest member of the ICDE, and am attending this international meet for the first time, though, of course, I look forward to many such occasions in the years to come. I have chosen to speak today on Distance Education as a key factor for building literacy in India. I will also touch base upon the use of ICT as an important factor in this system as I am a great advocate of the use of modern technology in distance education and am convinced that in the next two decades or so the pattern of education will undergo a revolution because of increasing use of technology, and also new innovations in this field. Though my thoughts are based on Indian conditions, they may be relevant, to most of the other developing countries too especially from the South East Asian region.

Shortly we shall complete the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Tremendous economic, scientific and technological development has taken place in the last 200 years all over the world; nevertheless a large mass of humanity still lives a poverty-stricken life. Ignorance, malnutrition and disease have severely affected human endeavor. Global warming is no longer a myth and is staring darkly at mankind. Unless some drastic and imaginative steps are taken by the right thinking people all over the world, the problem of poverty, socio-economic divide and deprivation will continue to plague us throughout the new century. It may create a set of new socio-economic problems which may further accentuate poverty and deprivation. In this address I have chosen to examine the role of distance education in building literacy as well as its role in the economic development of India, mainly because of the availability of the relevant data.

India is an important country in South Asia. It comprises 28 states and 7 Union territories and has a federal political structure. It is one of the less developed countries of the world, with the per capita GNP of only US \$ 740. Its population is estimated at 1.12 billion which is more than 17 percent of the world population, though it accounts for only 2.4 percent of the world's surface area. Thus, a highly adverse land: man ratio is a special characteristic of this country. India will also become within the next 20 years a country with the youngest population.

### **Literacy, education and human resource development**

The discussion so far would bring home two important economic characteristics: first, the country is economically very poor; second, the country is plagued with illiteracy and the quality of the labour-force is far below the standards of the developed countries. The labour not only lacks in the skills necessary for the available jobs but, being illiterate, also the capacity to acquire new knowledge for better jobs.

UNESCO defines an illiterate person as one who cannot, with understanding, both read and write a short, simple statement on their everyday life. Indian was ranked 147<sup>th</sup> out of 177 countries measured for literacy by UNESCO.

I am now quoting some data from a recent article by Subodh Varma in the Times of India mentioning some shocking yet realistic facts and figures related to the education scenario in India - In 1961, only about 28% Indians were literate while in 2006 the estimates put literacy at about 66%. This is truly an appreciable jump in literacy rates; however over 380 million still remain illiterate. That is the largest number of illiterates in any country. The total number of children in the age group of 6 to 24 years is about 460 million. Only about 63% of them are actually studying. Over 170 million or about 37% potential students have been left out of the opportunities of education. Experts and policy makers offer many reasons why so many have been left behind by the country's education system. Although poverty is one of the major reasons why youth and children quit studying to start working there are four great divides which pervade every aspect of life including education in India – they are – the gender divide, the rural-urban divide, the rich-poor divide and still prevalent caste divide. In each case there is a disadvantaged section, which finds it difficult to have access to educational and employment opportunities and thus gets left out. Thus one finds lower literacy rates, higher drop out rates and lower enrollment ratios amongst agricultural labourers, tribal women, scheduled castes and such under-privileged.

The 11<sup>th</sup> Plan is termed as “India's Educational Plan.” It places highest importance on education as a centered instrument of achieving rapid inclusive growth. Education and skill development are at the core of our government's Plan. The Indian Government's 11th Five Year Plan for the country has a significant emphasis on both education and ICT. Today there are 378 Universities, 18064 colleges, 4.92 lakh teachers and almost 140 lakh student enrollments in higher education, making the Indian higher education system as one of the largest in the world. There are 23 Central Universities, 216 State Universities, 110 Deemed Universities, 11 private Universities and 38 institutions of national & state importance in India. The Government plans to setup 30 new central universities, and several additional colleges in order to achieve the gross enrollment ratio in higher education from the present 11% to 21% by 2015. The government has pledged to raise public spending on education from the present 3.6% to 6% of GDP. Education has a 19.4% share in the total plan outlay - by far

the largest and much more than earlier years. The plan focuses on raising the literacy from present 66% (in 2006) to 80% in a ten year span. These targets seem difficult if not impossible.

The Indian government's plan also highlights on "inclusive growth". As I mentioned earlier many sections of our society have been left out of growth that India has achieved in recent times. The rates of poverty and illiteracy are higher among the under-privileged and backward sections of our society as compared to the affluent sections. Women, backward class, rural, minority and tribal groups are some of those which have not received participation in the growth of our country and as a result have not received all those opportunities that have benefited the larger sections of our society. The literacy rates amongst these classes are even lower than their urban counterparts. The 11<sup>th</sup> Five Year plan has laid out guidelines and policies to focus on this inclusive growth which will enable participation of all sections of our society, in the growth process, irrespective of class, creed, gender, race and geographic location.

### **Distance education , What it is and why**

In general, distance education can be defined as the system of teaching by someone who is removed in space and time from the learner. Use of different types of media besides the print is an essential part of distance education. Though the teacher and the learner are separated, and the learner is often an individual who learns in his own place and at his own pace, the distance education system also envisages some sort of a two-way communication. Fortunately tremendous advancements in science & technology including the satellite based communication technology, have now made this possible. Student support services through electronic networking have been adopted by many institutions.

Fair and equitable access to education has been the main objective of the education system in most of the civilized countries. However, in large countries like India whose geographical conditions are such that small human habitations are dispersed far away from each other, equity in access to education has posed serious problems in extending the traditional systems of education. It is not only the physical infrastructural facilities but also the human resource in the form of teachers, which have posed a serious constraint. The potential of distance education to promote universal access to education and build literacy has been realized now and governments across the globe are looking at it more seriously. The system is also capable of providing a second chance of education to those who are eager for it. It is also capable of providing orientation and refresher courses to those already gainfully employed and also those who wish to acquire knowledge in fields other than their own. Thus distance education can provide education at various levels i.e. to the illiterates, the semi-literates, the skilled and technical workers and even those who are already well-educated and employed but wish to venture in newer fields.

## **Distance education – literacy and economic development**

The two major reasons for illiteracy in India are the dramatic growth in population vis-à-vis the number of available schools and the tendency of families to take their children out from school early to serve as breadwinners. In case of the girl-child, the families often take them out from school to serve as a helping hand at home or on the farm.

Although India has one of the largest primary education systems with 150 million children enrolled, 37% drop out before the 5<sup>th</sup> grade.

There is no single effective solution to this problem. However, some of the possible solutions could be:

1. Increasing the number of schools at a much faster rate
2. Getting good trained teachers
3. Adopting to ODL system for mass education

Increasing the number of schools so as to match the rate of population growth is an extremely difficult if no impossible solution (it would mean opening a new school every day for next 10 years). Good teachers are in general a scarce resource, coupled with the problem of teachers training to ensure quality.

The ODL system as a tool for mass education is indeed worth mentioning. Distance education can provide excellent *non-formal* education to millions of people living in rural areas of the under-developed world; this would involve use of the multi-media system especially the electronic system like audio-video educational facilities. Non-formal distance education can be used not only for imparting basic skills, knowledge and training but also for spreading knowledge of ways and means of raising productivity in rural occupations like agriculture, animal husbandry, forestry and fishery. It can be also be used for promoting important messages about health, population control, hygiene etc. The appropriate use of distance education coupled with efficient systems and technology can indeed bring about major changes and improvement building literacy especially amongst the poor, underprivileged and rural children and youth.

It has been seen that in large countries such as India, one of the major drawbacks in the education system in rural and remote areas is the non-availability of good teachers. Distance education system can also provide training to teachers at a massive level through the use of ICT while at the same time it can reduce the dependency on teachers for achieving learning. In a country such as India, where the teacher is a scarce resource, distance education coupled with innovative ICT solutions can create a model of education delivery and learning where the need for a teacher is reduced, if not eliminated. Online learning via WBT's, CBT's, laptops in local languages are classic examples of this type of a model if appropriately woven into the learning and education system.

In the field of formal education, distance education has indeed unlimited scope. Distance education can be used for imparting basic knowledge to those who have missed the primary education system in the conventional way. Distance education has an all absorbing role to play in liberal education, skill oriented education, vocational education, higher education and even scientific and technological education for adults who have not had a chance to learn them formally. Fortunately, most of the developing countries have by now started using distance education mode at the secondary and tertiary levels. Open Schools and Universities have also been set up in these countries. Universities have done a fantastic job of educating millions of children, youth and adults from all strata of our society.

### **New Technologies and Distance Education**

The education that developing nations desperately need is one which equalizes the opportunities for the poor and the disadvantaged, acts as a system of mass education and which generates employment opportunities thus raising the livelihoods of millions of people. New technologies can help distribute education from the world's best sources to all the people irrespective of age, sex, creed, religion, socio-economic status, etc. who are in need of education, thus crossing all geographical and social barriers. New technologies, namely satellite communication, fiber optic cable, computers, internet, wireless and the web have dramatically enhanced educational capabilities. Technology has allowed faster delivery and continuous updating of content in order to enhance quality, reach and application.

Fortunately, the world at large has seen tremendous developments in the field of science and technology, and education technology has not remained far behind. The emergence of the information technology in the field of education has brought about a revolution. This revolution has in a way removed the barriers of classroom learning.

The governments of most developing countries are today fighting to provide this equitable access to ICT for all segments of society. It would be apparent that unless the less developed countries are able to create an appropriate technological infrastructure to support the kind of learning needed in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, they would be left far behind. The need of 21<sup>st</sup> Century will be to exploit the information and technology revolution to the fullest possible extent. Economic development will depend to a large extent on creating and optimally using the technological infrastructure. Countries which would harness the power of multimedia communication for education and training purposes may be the economic powers of the present century.

It has been found that students who often do not perform well in conventional examination systems demonstrate high success levels in the use of IT and IT-enabled learning. IT is now being looked at to provide new directions in pedagogical practices. An amount of Rs. 5000 crores is being provided during

the 11th Five Year Plan of Government of India in order to provide ICT infrastructure in schools. Under this program each school will be provided with at least 10 computers, a server, a printer on LAN and broadband internet connectivity of 2Mbps. Training of teachers in the use of ICT for classroom learning will be an important component of this initiative. A number of steps have been taken for leveraging ICT at the higher education level.

### **Experimenting with new Technology at SCDL, PUNE**

Symbiosis Center For Distance Learning has been offering blended learning programs since 1994. Our programs are extremely popular as they meet the market needs and provide employment and career advancement opportunities to thousands of youth from India and over 42 different countries. Our curricula is constantly upgraded and quality is our prime focus. At the Symbiosis Center For Distance Learning, we realized the importance of ICT in education long back. Since 2004 especially we have focused significantly on implementing technology solutions which will increase access to education, improve quality, provide fast response to student queries and provide better student support services. We are the only educational institute in India to have a “paper-less” office and a dedicated student call center. Each student call including grievances are tracked for call history and carefully monitored for quality of response by trained professionals. We also house a “communication center” which answers student queries sent via email and guarantee a response of 1 business day. Technology has not been used to in its simplest form yet used appropriately and effectively. Rather than spending on costly software, we have focused on implementing cost-effective, simple yet efficient systems which have benefited our students tremendously. We track the complete details of each of our student right from enrollment to graduation thereby ensuring fast and accurate resolution of student issues. Technology has been used effectively in order to achieve this. Today, our students can track their own dispatches on the web site rather than calling the institute; they can submit assignments online and appear for an examination at any time 365 days of the year at their choice of location. Our students can access all the learning facilities such as e-learning, faculty chat sessions, exam booking, academic performance etc through our sophisticated web portal and thus feel a part of a large virtual campus created by appropriate use of ICT. Our institute has thus gained significant reputation and popularity not only for offering high quality education, but also for bringing out innovative student support services with appropriate and effective use of modern technology. This has infact been one of reasons for our exponential growth from a mere 8000 students in 2001 to an overwhelming 200,000 student strength in 2008.

### **Conclusion**

By way of conclusion, I can only say that those of us actively involved in providing distance education to a large number of learners are greatly helped in our mission by the advent of new technology in the field of education per se, and distance education in particular. The new technological devices like the computer, internet and the web have greatly enhanced our reach to the disadvantaged sections of our community; the snag, however, is that many of them have still no access to the technical devices to derive the full benefit of distance learning. I am optimistic that in the coming 5-10 years, technology will penetrate down to the smaller villages and hamlets of our great country, empowering all our people to benefit from the country's economic growth and enabling us to achieve higher literacy rates while providing education opportunities to all sections of our society irrespective of class, creed, race or gender. Let us all set forth with this optimism and dreams to eradicate illiteracy, poverty and discrimination. Let us today pledge to take education to every nook and corner of this world and bring into its folds all those especially the under-privileged who are desirous of seeking knowledge but have been left behind in this race of economic development and growth.

Before ending, I would like to thank all of you for patiently listening to my address. I would also like to thank the organizers and ICDE for giving me this opportunity to present my thoughts today. Thank You and May God Bless Us All.

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