Former union minister and noted writer Dr Shashi Tharoor today made a strong plea for girl education to attain all-round development.

Delivering the prestigious Asa Briggs lecture at the Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning – PCF 6 – here, Dr Tharoor said whenever he was asked to state the single most important thing that can be done to improve the world he would without hesitation offer a two-word mantra: “Educate Girls.”

Baron Asa Briggs is a historian and former Chancellor of Britain’s Open University.

In his 40-minute lecture, Dr Tharoor dwelled upon various issues relating to development in developing countries, particularly India, and quoted various studies and his own experiences to stress the importance of education.

“Of all the many paradoxes with which India abounds, the saddest must be that we are a country where nearly half the population is illiterate but which has produced the world’s second largest pool of trained scientists and engineers,” said Dr Tharoor.

Referring to the reasons for a rather high illiteracy rate despite remarkable progress in many fields in India, Dr Tharoor said “what is missing is not just financial resources, but a commitment on the part of our society as a whole to tackle the educational tasks that lie ahead.”

It was in this context that he emphasized that scholarly studies and research projects had established what common sense might already have told us: that if you educate a boy, you educate a person, but if you educate a girl, you educate a family and benefit an entire community.

Listing the benefits of girl education, Dr Tharoor said:

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‘Enhance On-Campus component in ODL’

Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) has aggressively been promoting Face-to-Face component in all its distance learning programmes.

This was declared by IGNOU Vice Chancellor Prof V.N.Rajasekharan Pillai here at a press conference held on the sidelines of the ongoing 6th Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning — PCF 6.

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Enhance face-to-face education

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Some academicians have been opposed to the idea of on-campus, face to face learning mode being practiced by some open universities. “Not only we ourselves have been increasing the Face-to-Face component in whichever programme it has been possible, but, as chairman of the Distance Education Council, we have been advising all other open universities in the country to go for convergence and use face-to-face mode as well, besides the distance learning, to provide teacher guidance and hands-on practical knowledge to students,” Prof Pillai said. IGNOU is the only Indian university, on the lines of world universities, that conducts Student Satisfaction Survey.

Pointing out that to make education relevant, in certain cases it is imperative to have face to face mode of teaching, Prof Pillai said in IGNOU, all the Engineering and Technology and Computer Science programmes, have their practical, project works and work-integrated learning. All distance education programmes have the required full-time practicals and project work wherever relevant.

He stressed that several leading open universities in various parts of the world, such as UK Open University and Hong Kong Open University, have taken to full-time residential programmes, either on-campus or in collaboration with public/private institutions.

IGNOU has a faculty strength of over 1,000 with doctoral and post-doctoral qualifications and 50,000 part-time academic counselors. A large number of very eminent scientists and academicians are also serving the University as consultants, Emeritus Professors and Chair Professors. The campus houses the Edusat — the exclusive satellite for education for the country — provided by the Indian Space Research Organisation.

There is lot of educational and training infrastructure as well as intellectual capabilities available outside the confines of the formal education system in the country. Without compromising the original objectives and focus of the participating institutions, and ensuring quality, rigour and standards, new programmes and innovative strategies for providing relevant education and training need to be worked out.

All over the world, universities, including Open Universities, are engaged in such practices effectively. “A country aspiring to enhance its Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) from 12 to 40 percent in the next five years needs to contextualise such processes and offer the best quality education to maximum students through its various Universities,” said Prof Pillai.

Invest in Girl Education: Shashi Tharoor

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“Increased schooling of mothers has a measurable impact on the health of their children, on the future schooling of the child, and on the child’s adult productivity.”

“The children of educated mothers consistently out-perform children with educated fathers and illiterate mothers.” Referring to a World Bank study, Dr Tharoor said that “for every four years of education, fertility is reduced by about one birth per mother. The more girls go to secondary school, the higher the country’s per capita income growth. And when girls work in the fields, as so many have to do across the developing world, their schooling translates directly to increased agricultural productivity.”

Earlier, IGNOU Pro-Vice Chancellor Prof PR Ramanujam welcomed Dr Tharoor and his wife Sunanda Pushkar Tharoor to the conference, and referred to the former minister as a “Public Intellectual.”

IGNOU VC Prof VN Rajasekharan Pillai, Chairman, Commonwealth of Learning (COL) Board of Directors Burchell Whiteman, and COL president Sir John Daniel also addressed the gathering comprising educationists from commonwealth countries.
ODL: What is Open? What is Distance?

There is a lot of misunderstanding about ‘Openness’ and ‘Distance’ when people talk about Open and Distance Learning (ODL). That includes leaders of ODL with long and varied experiences and otherwise good knowledge about the ODL systems at different levels. ‘Openness’ is a philosophy, an approach that aims to remove the constraints of the Conventional, Face-to-Face, Classroom Teaching at all levels.

If the conventional educational institutions can remove the constraints, they too become ‘Open’. ‘Openness’ encourages experiments and innovations. Open Universities are mandated to expand the opportunities to as many learners as possible through different modes like distance mode, online mode, and also Face-to-Face arrangements. It is scaling up with quality that places Open Universities on developing countries.

110 Open Universities now. There are many hundreds of other ODL institutions that operate under different names. The large numbers don't, in themselves, dilute quality. Student Support Services are also arranged depending on the material as well as human resources available to them.

Therefore, there can't be any one model that can fit the variety of situations that exist in India and other developing countries.

Admittedly, student support services pose a very major challenge in situations where ODL programmes are offered in a multi-cultural and multi-lingual situations where programmes are offered mostly in English as a medium of instruction. This itself is a great challenge to learners whose competence in using English is not sufficient or poor. We have to address this issue first, before we talk about quality, completion rate, standards, etc.

Any assumption that Face-to-Face offering of Programmes by Open University is perilous is disproved by about 29,000 students of UK Open University, 50 percent of classroom teaching of Hong Kong Open University and other Universities. In Australia -- eight distance education centres located in eight Universities, have been practicing Duel Mode approach over four decades.

All this goes on to prove that there is nothing philosophically and pedagogically wrong or perilous in this approach. In fact, this should increase, if ‘blended learning’ has any meaning, because the increasing applications of ICTs make the classical models of Open Universities inappropriate. It is a rather mechanical and traditional thinking, out of touch with the changing scenario of educational models.

Coming to Open Schooling, it is this sector that suffers most because of poor quality materials, untrained managers and low level of student support. UK and other developed western countries don't have Open Schools or mega Open Schools, because they believe the tender age of school-going children needs a lot of socialisation through Face-to-Face meetings with teachers and peer groups, in order to complete school education and then prepare themselves for college/university education.

In countries like India because of poor and limited provision of quality school education, open schools have been established. In fact, the practices of Open School need immediate review, focusing on Academic Achievements or failures of thousands of school learners. It's here that organisations like COL should adopt realistic policies to strengthen student support services for successful academic performance of under-privileged children whose numbers are in millions. In fact, here too, numbers have nothing to do with dilution of quality, if the practitioners as well as advocates know what they should be doing.

The adult learners and the school leavers, who are usually above the age of 17, become students of Open Universities and have a better judgment about their choices of courses/programmes at the higher education level. Any misinterpretation or misguidance in this context, will unnecessarily divert the focus of our work which has been yielding good results, as shown by the first-ever student satisfaction survey in India, conducted by IGNOU.

Such surveys should be followed up by other universities and open schools, in order to provide better student support services in different situations. Lack of clarity on the part of the ODL advocates and practitioners will lead to confusion and futile arguments.

The argumentative Indians should educate themselves for an informed debate on the above issues and stop misleading well-meaning ODL leaders, both in India and abroad while presenting information and facts to them.
FOURTH DAY IN FRAMES

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Delegates in a session; Prof Ram Takwale of I-CONSENT and former IGNOU VC, at a session on Community Development; and Albert Amoah Saah of Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana, at the same session.
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Delegates at the Trading Space: Models and Materials workshop; delegates during the tea break; foreign delegates reading PCF6 newsletter; Dr Nayantara Padhi of IGNOU during a session on Social Justice and delegates at the Trading Space: Models and Materials workshop.
FOURTH DAY IN FRAMES

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Delegates during a break; enjoying the sumptuous lunch and Sunanda Pushkar Tharoor after attending a keynote address at PCF6.
Addressing a session on gender issues, M. Ogbonna Ifeyinwa Nwaogu of National Open University of Nigeria stressed on Open and Distance Learning and Feminism.

"We have three key areas to focus upon if we seek equality for women in the world of ODL. First, what benefits have actually reached women as a result of the Open and Distance Education (ODE) policy? Second, how cost-effective educational opportunities are facilitating women's enrollment or access to education? and last, how has the life-long mode of education important to a society's socio-economic development empowered women, especially those in low-skilled employment?" said Nwaogu.

In another session on Social Justice, Akther Zobaida of Bangladesh Open University spoke on the Conceptual Framework for the Education of the Indigenous People through Open and Distance Learning. "Indigenous people live in isolates areas which lack basic infrastructure, health facilities etc. Here, we need to develop a conceptual strategy train these people via ODL," she said.

Facilitated by Prof Shambhunath Singh, Director, SOJNMS, IGNOU, the session on Community Development, the participants discussed ways to train media professionals to deliver quality media products. "An alternative method of media training needs to be evolved qualitatively to meet the industry needs in the current Indian media scenario," said Prof Singh.

Albert Amoah Saah of Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana, speaking at a session on Community Development, said: "Learner-participation becomes crucial to the overall development of an Adult Functional Literacy Programme. The task is to create the enabling environment for harnessing and enhancing learner-related factors that influence the learner's successful and significant participation."

Prof Ram Takwale of I-CONSENT, while speaking on the theme 'Nai Talim and Gandhian Approaches to Development, said: "The industrial technology and modernity associated with industrial society have enriched and empowered humanity but it has also resulted into poverty, deprivation and destruction."

"Through the linkage of education with wholesome work and appropriate empowering and decentralised technologies, Mahatma Gandhi's approach effectively leads to a successful implementation of Nai Talim or New Education Methodology."
PCF, a thriving community

This is my ‘first time’ at the PCF and what an exciting experience it has been! The Forum, I found, is unlike any other inter-national get-together-convention, congress or seminar; it is actually a thriving community ‘open and inclusive’ that seems to effortlessly bridge vast distances providing a unique opportunity for learning and sharing. It offers a fascinating range of resources-human and technological- covering the entire gamut from traditional folk art forms to the state of the art digital gadgets.

I was drawn into this network via my association with CEMCA pertaining to Radio Enabled Learning and must thank Dr Sridharan for this. Keynote addresses and thematic discussions have focused on community centric initiatives and interventions that prioritize development and equity. This has engendered stimulating exchanges and triggered serious introspection. How does one define ‘community’, ‘development’ and ‘social justice’? What about ‘quality’ and ‘sustainability’ of development-communications projects? How do these dovetail with open distance learning? Can the Open Universities mandated to provide quality education- formal or informal-bear this additional burden?

I for quite some past have been distressed by the erosion of community in the traditional sense in my native hills in the Himalayan region and decay of folk forms of communication. At the same time emerging communities in the wake of accelerated, unplanned urbanization, breakdown of joint families and accent on individual self following the digital technological imperatives seem to present unprecedented opportunities.

As promised, the participatory dialogical sessions at the PCF were deeply satisfying and enriching. I look forward to future PCFs.

FIRST PERSON

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PCF6 PROGRAMME, NOVEMBER 28, 2010

09.00-10.30 AM Theme Keynote: Skills Development
Speaker: Dr Caroline Seelig (Oman Hall)
10:30-11.00 AM: Tea Break
11.00-12.30 PM: Parallel Sessions
Theme: Social Justice (SJ8-PS1) Session Title: ODL and Social Justice (Oman Hall)
Theme: Social Justice (SJ8-PS2) Session Title: ICTs and ODL (Nayanar)
Theme: Social Justice (SJ8-PS3) Session Title: Scaling Up Quality Education for All (Cheramon)
Theme: Social Justice (SJ8-PS4) Session Title: Education and Employment of Persons with Disabilities (Manappuram 1)
Theme: Community Development (CD8-PS1) Session Title: University-College Linkages (Manappuram 2)
Theme: Community Development (CD8-PS2) Session Title: Can we really learn from mobiles? (Manappuram 3)
Theme: Skills Development (SD8-PS1) Session Title: Entrepreneurship Skills for National Development (Manappuram 4)
Theme: Formal Education (FE8-PS1) Session Title: Application of Technology in ODL (Raja Ravi Verma)

Theme: Formal Education (FE8-PS2) Session Title: Learning in Digital Age with Video, Radio, iPod and Mobile Devices (Travancore)
12.30:14.00 PM: Lunch Break (Space Frame Convention Centre)
14:00: 15:30 PM: Parallel Sessions
Theme: Social Justice (SJ9-PS1) Session Title: Social Justice Closing Plenary (Manappuram 2)
Theme: Community Development (CD9-PS1) Session Title: Community Development Closing Plenary (Manappuram 2)
Theme: Skills Development (SD9-PS1) Session Title: Skills Development Closing Plenary (Manappuram 3)
Theme: Formal Education (FE9-PS1) Session Title: Formal Education Closing Plenary (Manappuram 4)
15.30:16.00 PM: Tea Break
16.00: 17.30 PM: Closing Plenary Keynote Speaker: Sir John Daniel (Oman Hall)
17.30: 18.00 PM: Concluding Remarks: Prof VN Rajasekharan Pillai (Oman Hall)
Vote of Thanks: Prof PR Ramanujan