

Democratization of Higher Education: Experiences of Dr.B.R.Ambedkar Open University, India's First Open University

Kanaka Sabha Ramana, Dean Faculty of Arts, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University, Hyderabad,
India. kanakasabharamana@yahoo.co.in

One of the objectives of Open Distance Learning system in India is to democratize higher education by providing access to large segment of the population. In India the Open Distance Learning System mainly focuses on solving the basic problem of providing equal access to higher education. In spite of limited access to higher education India faces another problem that are the inequalities of other kinds with in the education system mainly, the gender inequality and inequalities among the disadvantaged groups such as weaker sections in the larger neglected masses of the country.

OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING – ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION: EXPERIENCE OF DR. B.R. AMBEDKAR OPEN UNIVERSITY

Open Distance Learning system in India has provide maximum access to higher education. One National Open University, Thirteen State Open universities and more than sixty correspondence Institutions affiliated to universities are offering educational access to the larger segment of population in India.

There are twenty one conventional institutions (5 national level, 3 deemed universities, 13 state universities) offering Higher Education in the State of Andhra Pradesh. The establishment of Dr. B.R.Ambedkar Open University consequently led to the establishment of 11 Schools/Directorates/Centres of Distance Education by conventional universities. Apart from that a number of institutions outside university system are offering programmes through Distance mode.

Dr. B.R.Ambedkar Open University is the pioneer in democratizing educational opportunities in Andhra Pradesh State, India. Being the first Open University in India the university proved that open distance learning system can full fill and serve the needs and demands of larger segment of population who deprived of basic, relevant education and to be part of the national development.

We can assess the access provided by Dr. B.R.Ambedkar Open University to Higher Education in Andhra Pradesh basing on factors such as enrollment pattern – age wise, employment wise, gender wise and marginalized section wise.

Enrollment Pattern in Dr. B.R.Ambedkar Open University

The enrollment pattern in Dr. B.R.Ambedkar Open University over two decades indicates the effectiveness of Open Distance Learning system in accommodating social demand for higher education.

Year-wise Student Strength for All the Programmes Since 1983 Dr. B.R.Ambedkar Open University

Year	Enrolment
1983-84	6,321
1984-85	22,462
1985-86	25,407
1986-87	35,402
1987-88	30,534
1988-89	32,773
1989-90	35,062

1990-91	43,690
1991-92	57,144
1992-93	58,366
1993-94	59,796
1994-95	55,018
1995-96	79,825
1996-97	73,257
1997-98	88,341
1998-99	93,477
1999-00	1,01,212
2000-01	99,517
2001-02	90,492
2002-03	1,28,391
2003-04	1,33,452
2004-05	1,50,918
2005-06	1,60,416
2006-07	1,50,474

At present Dr. B.R.Ambedkar Open University is seen as a parallel system to regular education. It is evident by increase in number of students year by year.

Age wise Enrollment in Dr. B.R.Ambedkar Open University

The age wise pattern shows that the adult learners are increasingly getting interested in higher education and are looking for opportunities to improve their qualifications and skills to seek employment, to change jobs or further own personal development.

Age Group-wise Enrolment of Students into First Year Undergraduate Programme in Dr. B.R.Ambedkar Open University (1983-84 to 2006-07)

Year	Age Groups			Total	% Age Groups		
	Young (<=25)	Middle (26- 50)	Old (>50)		Young (<=25)	Middle (26- 50)	Old (>50)
1983-84	2976	3224	31	6231	47.76	51.74	0.50
1984-85	5544	5669	31	11244	49.30	50.42	0.28
1985-86	7890	7686	126	15702	50.25	48.95	0.80
1986-87	12000	7110	163	19273	62.26	36.89	0.85
1987-88	8537	7681	72	16271	52.36	47.20	0.44
1988-89	10119	6423	155	16697	60.60	38.47	0.93
1989-90	11094	5078	134	16306	68.04	31.14	0.82
1990-91	22628	4428	448	27504	82.27	16.10	1.63
1991-92	23952	7961	532	32450	73.82	24.54	1.64
1992-93	27384	7415	748	35547	77.04	20.86	2.10
1993-94	23097	5784	460	29341	78.72	19.71	1.57

1994-95	24406	7277	422	32105	76.02	22.67	1.31
1995-96	38312	7684	489	46485	82.42	16.53	1.05
1996-97	32474	7122	784	40380	80.42	17.64	1.94
1997-98	34032	8682	610	43324	78.55	20.04	1.41
1998-99	43368	11087	752	55207	78.56	20.08	1.36
1999-00	41895	11289	521	53705	78.01	21.02	0.97
2000-01	37241	10187	692	48120	77.39	21.17	1.44
2001-02	33714	9098	458	43270	77.91	21.03	1.06
2002-03	39767	14674	1505	55946	71.08	26.23	2.69
2003-04	53168	15000	914	69082	76.96	21.71	1.33
2004-05	63010	9002	592	72604	86.78	12.41	0.81
2005-06	32465	432147	746	76425	42.47	56.56	0.97
2006-07	22529	39580	483	62952	35.78	62.87	1.35

We can also see younger students showing more interest in getting themselves educated. This again indicates the effectiveness of Open Distance Learning system which provides access to higher education, while partly fulfilling the objectives of national policy to expand the Higher Education to cover further from 11% to 15% of the 18 to 23 years age group.

Employment wise Enrollment in Dr. B.R.Ambedkar Open University

Working people proportion is also one of the indicators that those already working are interested in improving their skills. The flexibility in Open Distance Learning thus can be combined with a job, where the studies can be done at the workplace or at home is ideal for learners who would otherwise have been excluded.

Employment-wise Enrolment of Students in First Year Undergraduate Programme in Dr. B.R.Ambedkar Open University (1983-84 to 2006-07)

Year	Employed	Unemployed	Total	%Employed	%Unemployed
1983-84	4109	2122	6231	65.94	34.06
1984-85	8315	2929	11244	73.95	26.05
1985-86	6157	9545	15702	39.21	60.79
1986-87	6087	13186	19273	31.58	68.42
1987-88	5418	10853	16271	33.30	66.70
1988-89	7065	9632	16697	42.31	57.69
1989-90	5815	10491	16306	35.66	64.34
1990-91	8364	19140	27504	30.41	69.59
1991-92	10402	22048	32450	32.06	67.94
1992-93	8971	26576	35547	25.24	74.76
1993-94	10906	18435	29341	37.17	62.83
1994-95	10738	21367	32105	33.45	66.55
1995-96	15517	30968	46485	33.38	66.62
1996-97	13153	27227	40380	32.57	67.43

1997-98	11856	31468	43324	27.37	72.63
1998-99	18850	36357	55207	34.14	65.86
1999-00	12597	41108	53705	23.46	76.54
2000-01	15095	33025	48120	31.37	68.63
2001-02	13738	29532	43270	31.75	68.25
2002-03	8936	47010	55946	15.97	84.03
2003-04	24029	45053	69082	34.78	65.22
2004-05	6830	65774	72604	9.41	90.59
2005-06	7649	66542	76425	10.01	87.07
2006-07	7123	55829	62952	11.32	88.68

Gender wise Enrollment in Dr. B.R.Ambedkar Open University

Women empowerment is one the indicators of national development and women education is gaining more significance in the developing nations. It is evident that Distance Education is the only alternative flexible system which can accommodate the demand for higher education from the women who deprived of equal opportunities through the ages. It is also important to note that the larger segment of women if provided opportunities can contribute system to the development of nation. It is in this context Open Distance Learning is proving as an effective system which can contribute to the empowerment of women.

Gender-Wise Enrolment of Students in First Year Undergraduate Programme in Dr. B.R.Ambedkar Open University (1983- 84 to 2006- 07)

Year	Male	Female	Total	Male (%)	Female (%)
1983-84	5296	935	6231	84.99	15.01
1984-85	8387	2857	11244	74.59	25.41
1985-86	11291	4411	15702	71.91	28.09
1986-87	13764	5509	19273	71.42	28.58
1987-88	11251	5020	16271	69.15	30.85
1988-89	11351	5346	16697	68.00	32.00
1989-90	11258	5048	16306	69.04	30.96
1990-91	20002	7502	27504	72.72	27.28
1991-92	23742	8708	32450	73.16	26.84
1992-93	26355	9192	35547	74.14	25.86
1993-94	21236	8105	29341	72.37	27.63
1994-95	23218	8887	32105	72.32	27.68
1995-96	34276	12209	46485	73.74	26.26
1996-97	30407	9973	40380	75.30	24.70
1997-98	31377	11947	43324	72.42	27.58
1998-99	40821	14386	55207	73.94	26.06
1999-00	38336	15369	53705	71.38	28.62
2000-01	33077	15043	48120	68.74	31.26
2001-02	27804	15106	43270	65.00	35.00

2002-03	36803	19143	55946	65.78	34.22
2003-04	46899	22183	69082	67.89	32.11
2004-05	46146	26458	72604	63.56	36.44
2005-06	50001	26424	76425	65.42	34.58
2006-07	37613	24979	62592	60.09	39.91

The enrollment pattern suggests the increase in women enrollment year by year. It is evident that the empowerment of women is linked with their educational status. They can achieve socio, economic, political empowerment through Open Distance Learning.

Marginalized sections Enrollment in Dr. B.R.Ambedkar Open University

In spite of the efforts made by a great people like Jyothiba Phoolle and Baba Sahen Ambedkar, the Indian society still remains stratified with hierarchically frozen castes, which are having differential access to educational opportunities, economic resources, political power and social honor. Ambedkar also opined and believed that education can only liberate people and he observed universal education is the only remedy of social injustices in India.

Dr. B.R.Ambedkar Open University has started many study centres in remote and tribal areas to provide access to weaker sections of the society especially Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). In the beginning the enrollment of SC and ST students seeking admission into Under Graduate Programmes is not encouraging. This is due to the fee policy of the University. The system of collecting tuition fee from the poor SC and ST students and reimbursing after long waiting discouraged the students.

Enrolment Trends before fee concession policy

Year	Total	SC	SC%	ST	ST%	Others	Others %
1983-84	6231	498	7.99	65	1.04	5568	90.97
1984-85	11244	1263	11.23	189	1.68	9792	87.09
1985-86	15702	1580	10.06	190	1.21	13934	88.74
1986-87	19273	1869	9.70	234	1.21	17170	89.09
1987-88	16271	1653	10.16	189	1.16	14429	88.68
1988-89	16697	1551	9.29	235	1.41	14911	89.30
1989-90	16306	1445	8.86	208	1.28	14653	89.86
1990-91	27504	3048	11.08	582	2.12	23874	86.80
1991-92	32450	3899	12.02	643	1.98	27908	86.00
1992-93	35547	4363	12.27	676	1.90	30508	85.83

The enrolment pattern of SC and ST students to the total is very low in one decade the rate of increase in the percentage is also very negligible. Subsequently the university changed its fee policy and implemented fee concessions policy.

Enrolment Trends after fee concession policy

Acad. Year	Total	SC	SC%	ST	ST%	Others	Others%
1993-94	29341	4196	14.30	674	2.30	24471	83.40
1995-96	46485	8660	18.63	1340	2.88	36485	78.49
1996-97	40380	9011	22.32	1522	3.77	29847	73.92
1997-98	43324	9489	21.90	1887	4.36	31948	73.74
1998-99	55207	13240	23.98	3129	5.67	38838	70.35

1999-00	53705	11720	21.82	3051	5.68	38934	72.50
2000-01	48120	9582	19.91	3134	6.51	35404	73.58
2001-02	43270	5322	12.30	2375	5.49	35573	82.21
2002-03	55946	12304	21.99	4120	7.36	39522	70.65
2003-04	69082	14673	21.24	5116	7.41	49293	71.35
2004-05	72604	12985	17.88	4428	6.10	55191	76.02
2005-06	75595	13435	17.77	4552	6.20	57608	76.03

Source: BRAOU - Admission Section & Special Cell (SC/ST) Records.

There is a positive increase in the enrollment pattern of SC and ST students after implementing fee concession policy. Anand Pawar in his study 'On role of BRAOU in promoting weaker sections through distance education – A passing review' appreciated the initiative of Dr. B.R.Ambedkar Open University in promoting the cause of empowering SC and ST students by implementing fee concession policy. Such activities initiated by the Open Distance Learning systems will provide an opportunity to weaker sections for liberation from social exclusion.

PROBLEMS OF RETENTION

Several research studies are conducted to find out the reasons for Distance Learner's dropout from the courses. Basing on the investigations into dropout issues the reasons for discontinuation may be basically categorized into three groups. They are :

1. Personal reasons 2. Programme or course related reasons 3. Student Support related reasons. (Bharath Inder Fozdar, Lalita, S.Kumar & S.Kannan, 'A Survey of study on the reasons responsible for student dropout from the Bachelor of Science programme of Indira Gandhi National Open University, The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learners, Vol. 7 No. 3 – 2006.)

Many of the factors that influenced Distance Learner Attrition and persistence are out of the institutional control. Therefore Robert D. Nash in his study suggests to focus on controllable factors 'such as student skills and expectations as well as specific response to those factors such as supplemental tutoring and pre course orientations'. (Robert D. Nash, 'Course completion rates among Distance Learners: Identifying possible methods to improve retention', online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, Vol. 8 No. 4 winter 2005, University of West Georgia, Distance Education Centre).

The Open Distance Learning institutions in India are yet to develop comprehensive strategies to reduce the dropout rates in Distance Learners. They are more worried about the enrollment of students than of the completion of the courses. Dr. B.R.Ambedkar Open University also yet to draw an action plan to tackle the dropout problem at all levels. The university has to identify prospective dropouts using various methods such as monitoring of attendance at study centres, continuity of submission of assignments and assessing the numbers of those guilty of non-payment of fees and so on so forth. Dr. B.R.Ambedkar Open University once attempted conducting intensive counseling sessions to the students of Under Graduate programme by a team of expert counselors for over a decade. But due to various reasons it could not continue the experiment and consequently failed in reducing the dropout rate. Dr. B.R.Ambedkar Open University has to undertake many more projects in this direction to assess the dropout status and evolve an action plan which can effectively address this problem of retention.

Dr. B.R.AMBEDKAR OPEN UNIVERSITY'S CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT

Open Distance Learning system in developing nations contributed to the cause of social inclusion of weaker sections by empowering them through education. The following success story of the student of Dr. B.R.Ambedkar Open University describes the effective change and empowerment brought into the individual life of Anil Jyoti.

Youngest among the five girl children and deprived of all major childhood dreams, against her wishes she was married off at the age of sixteen and bore two daughters. Her in-laws were in to agriculture and Jyoti did not like to work in the fields as she was more inclined towards studies and education. While she was working in a night school for a meager salary a glow of light in to her life in the form of Dr.B.R.Ambedkar

Open University notification. After clearing the entrance life treaded a difficult path but bearing all the difficulties and discouragement, she continued her degree study. There was a notification for the post of special teacher with graduation and vocational teacher training course as qualifications. Since Jyoti had teacher training course, she applied for job showing proof that she appeared for final year Graduation exam with Dr.B.R.Ambedkar Open University. Job and completion of Degree with good marks came at the same time and her joy knew no bounds. She completed MA Sociology and got promotion. She joined software training class. Though it was difficult, she joined her children in a hostel and finally succeeded in getting visa with friends help. Jyoti left for America in 2000 on a visitor visa after applying long leave for her job. She could get a job in a software consultancy firm and it was an upswing from then on. She moved to a better job with a better pay and comforts. She returned to India only after she acquired working visa. Back in America, she started her own business and started doing well. In 2005 she could get a green card and her family moved to the states. However, Jyoti wants to return to India and start an old age home. This is how a girl has reached America after great struggle with life and society to shape in to a successful woman.

There are number of success stories of distance learners who got benefited from the educational programmes of Dr. B.R.Ambedkar Open University. This is evident from the above illustration.

CONCLUSION

Education remains no more a universal Human Right and so called democratic welfare Governments are lacking political will to provide enough funding for Higher Education. In this context Open Distance Learning has to play a major role to provide access to Higher Education for the larger, deprived segments of population in the developing societies.

The constitutional obligation of 'Right for education' is realized by the emergence of Open Distance Learning system in India. The first open university in India, Dr. B.R.Ambedkar Open University achieved notable progress in providing access to higher education in the State of Andhra Pradesh in its two and half decades of journey. It has contributed to the empowerment of larger segment of deprived sections of people and thus liberating them from social exclusion by making them part of development. It is evident from the success stories of the students of Dr. B.R.Ambedkar Open University.

It should be noted that development of any society depends on its capability to create and use of the knowledge available to the possible extent. The level of extent in turn depends on the accessibility of knowledge. Accessibility in turn depends on welfare attitude of the societies to extend equal educational opportunities to all the people. Equal opportunities led to the empowerment of marginalized sections of the society. Availability does not mean accessibility. Accessibility to disadvantaged sections is possible through open distance learning which evident from Dr. B.R.Ambedkar Open University's experience for the past two and half decades.

It is evident from Dr. B.R.Ambedkar Open University's experiences that the enrollment in rural areas are low when compared to urban, female enrollment is low when compared to men. Enrollment of Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes is low compared to others. These multiple disparities must be eliminated by providing equal access to higher education.

It is high time to develop a comprehensive policy to resolve the disparities and to provide equal access to higher education. It is important to enhance the access to higher education, but it is more important to develop strategies to reduce the dropout rate in distance learners.

It is observed that India by 2020 may have more than 330 million people in the age group of 20 to 35. A strong support from Open Distance Learning system in providing access to Higher Education will definitely contribute to India's development. If need based short and long term training facilities were available through Open Distance Learning system India will become stronger in Human Resources which is the basic factor for development of any country.