

Role of Open Distance Learning in Social Empowerment– A Case Study of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University

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Introduction

Education is an agent of social change and social empowerment. It has been mainly instrumental for the development of science and technology. It has brought about phenomenal changes in every aspect of human life. Education can initiate social changes by bringing about a change in the outlook and attitude of man. It brings about a change in the pattern of social relationships and thereby it may lead to social transformation. Social empowerment is a process by which people reclaim their power, the power to shape their own lives and to influence the course of events around them. They use their power against oppression and exclusion, and for participation, peace and human rights. Education enables people to become not only economically independent but also autonomous and decision-oriented. Open universities and distance education institutions are able to democratize higher education by taking education to the large numbers, particularly the poor and needy at an affordable cost.

The Study

It is proposed, in this paper, to study the role of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University (BRAOU) in social empowerment by providing access and equal opportunities for higher education in Andhra Pradesh. For this purpose, an attempt is made to find out the role of BRAOU in higher education in the State in terms of access and reach to different equity groups – disadvantaged groups, women, and rural people. As the students enrolled for undergraduate programmes constitutes 90.43 per cent (i.e., 1,64,574) of the total students (1,81,988) of BRAOU in 2009-10 academic year, the students admitted in the first year undergraduate programmes are considered for analysis in this paper.

The Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are:

- To examine the role of open distance learning (ODL) in higher education in Andhra Pradesh;
- To analyze the trends in enrolment of students for undergraduate courses of BRAOU in terms of gender, employment, social category, etc.;
- To study the role of BRAOU in social empowerment by providing access and equality of opportunity to the seekers of education at Bachelor's Degree level; and
- To study the extent to which BRAOU is helping the disadvantaged and other equity groups by taking education to rural and tribal areas .

Student Profile and Enrolment Pattern for Undergraduate Programmes in BRAOU

The required data and information were collected from secondary sources with regard to the personal particulars of students. One of the aspects of the study is the enrolment pattern. The profile of the enrolled students and trends in enrolment over the years for various programmes is an indicator of the fulfillment of the objectives of BRAOU. Hence the patterns of the enrolled students have been analysed in terms of sex, marital status, employment, entry channel, social status etc. to study the nature and composition of the students for undergraduate programmes since the inception of BRAOU.

It can be seen from Table-1 that on the whole all the years witnessed a steady rise in student enrolment with a marginal decline in some years in the first year undergraduate programmes, which reached a peak in 2008-09 with 82,037.

Table-1

ENROLMENT OF STUDENTS IN FIRST YEAR UNDERGRADUTE PROGRAMME IN ANDHRA PRADESH IN BRAOU (1983-84 To 2009-10)

Year	Total	% of growth over previous year	% of growth over Base Year(1983-84)
1983-84	6231.00	0.00	0.00
1984-85	11244.00	80.45	80.45
1985-86	15702.00	39.65	152.00
1986-87	19273.00	22.74	209.31
1987-88	16271.00	-15.58	161.13
1988-89	16697.00	2.62	167.97
1989-90	16306.00	-2.34	161.69
1990-91	27504.00	68.67	341.41
1991-92	32450.00	17.98	420.78
1992-93	35547.00	9.54	470.49
1993-94	29341.00	-17.46	370.89
1994-95	32105.00	9.42	415.25
1995-96	46485.00	44.79	646.03
1996-97	40380.00	-13.13	548.05
1997-98	43309.00	7.25	695.06
1998-99	55207.00	27.47	886.01
1999-2000	53705.00	-2.72	861.90
2000-01	48120.00	-10.40	772.27
2001-02	43270.00	-10.08	694.43
2002-03	55946.00	29.30	897.87
2003-04	69082.00	23.48	1108.68
2004-05	72604.00	5.10	1165.21
2005-06	77051.00	6.13	1236.58
2006-07	62774.00	-18.53	1007.45
2007-08	69868.00	11.30	1121.30
2008-09	82037.00	17.42	1316.59

2009-10	77418.00	-5.63	1242.47
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When the decennial increase of literate population of Andhra Pradesh State from 1981 to 2001 is compared with the student enrolment of BRAOU, it reveals that the performance of BRAOU in providing educational opportunities is commendable. The total number of students enrolled during the first decade of the BRAOU was 1, 97,523 while those enrolled during the second decade was 4 47,720, thus the decennial percentage increase was 126.70%, whereas the percentage of literates in 1991 was 52.11 and in 2001 it was 61.55 revealing that the decennial percentage increase is only 9.44, as per the 1991 and 2001 Census Reports of the Indian Government respectively.

Gender-wise Enrolment

It may be seen from Table-2 that there is an increasing trend in the enrolment of both male and female students from the beginning.

Table-2

**GENDER-WISE ENROLMENT OF STUDENTS IN FIRST YEAR
UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMME IN BRAOU (1983-84 To 2009-10)**

Year	Male	Female	Total	MALE (%)	FEMALE (%)
1983-84	5296	935	6231	84.99	15.01
1985-86	11291	4411	15702	71.91	28.09
1990-91	20002	7502	27504	72.72	27.28
1995-96	34276	12209	46485	73.74	26.26
2000-01	33077	15043	48120	68.74	31.26
2005-06	50409	26642	77051	65.42	34.58
2009-10	46500	30918	77418	60.06	39.94

However, there is a steady and gradual increase in the case of female students' enrolment, recording an ever-high enrolment of 30,918 (39.94 per cent) in 2009-10. The enrolment of women has always been more than 25 per cent except in one year (i.e. 15.01 per cent), the first year in which the university started offering the courses.

Employed Vs. Unemployed Students

The occupation-wise analysis (Table-3) of student enrolment in the first year U.G. programme shows that the number of unemployed students was more than that of the employed students except in the first year i.e., 1983-84.

Table-3

**OCCUPATION-WISE 'ENROLMENT OF STUDENTS IN FIRST YEAR UNDERGRADUATE
PROGRAMME IN BRAOU (1983-84 To 2009-10)**

Year	Employed	Unemployed	Total	%Employed	%Unemployed
1983-84	4109	2122	6231	65.94	34.06
1985-86	6157	9545	15702	39.21	60.79
1990-91	8364	19140	27504	30.41	69.59
1995-96	15517	30968	46485	33.38	66.62
2000-01	15095	33025	48120	31.37	68.63

2005-06	7740	69311	77051	10.05	89.95
2009-10	10877	66541	77418	14.05	85.95

During the first year the percentage of the employed students was 66% while that of the unemployed students was 34. It may be seen from the table that the percentage of unemployed persons increased to 60.79 per cent in 1985-86. The number of unemployed students has increased perceptibly reaching the maximum i.e. 89.95% in the academic year 2005-06. The percentage of employed students has been less than 15% from 2005-06.

Formal and Non-formal Entry Channels

The enrolment pattern of formal and non-formal students is quite interesting. Table-4 shows the enrolment of the students of both the streams. With regard to the trend in the proportions of the non-formal and formal students, the gap between their proportions shows an overall decreasing trend over a period of time since the inception of the University, reaching almost 50:50 in the year 1997-98. Thereafter the gap between the enrolment proportions of the formal and non-formal streams started widening till 2004-05.

Table-4

STREAM-WISE ENROLMENT OF STUDENTS IN FIRST YEAR UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMMES IN BRAOU (1983-84 To 2009-10)

Year	Stream		Total	% Stream	
	Formal	Non-formal		Formal	Non-formal
1983-84	2181	4050	6231	35	65
1985-86	2518	13184	15702	16.04	83.96
1990-91	9239	18265	27504	33.59	66.41
1995-96	11587	34898	46485	24.93	75.07
2000-01	20129	27991	48120	41.83	58.17
2005-06	24365	52686	77051	31.62	68.38
2009-10	23918	53500	77418	30.89	69.11

It is observed that while the enrolment of non-formal students continued to show consistent trend between 1983-84 and 2009-10. The share of the non-formal students has been consistent with two-thirds of the total student population from 1983-84. The increase in the percentage of non-formal students is in the direction of fulfilling the mandate of the university as mentioned in the objects of the university.

Geographical Background

Table-5 reveals the details of the students with Urban, Rural and Tribal background. The data with regard to the residence particulars of the students is available only from 1993-94. The average proportions of the three groups, Urban, Rural and Tribal, i.e. 38:57:5 respectively, are maintained throughout the period of study with fluctuations in some years.

Table-5

**AREA-WISE STUDENTS'ENROLMENT IN 1st YEAR UNDERGRADUATE
PROGRAMME IN BRAOU (1993-84 To 2009-10)**

Year	Area of Residence			Total	% Area of Residence		
	Urban	Rural	Tribal		Urban	Rural	Tribal
1993-94	13379	15409	553	29341	45.6	52.52	1.88
1995-96	17684	26433	2368	46485	38.04	56.86	5.1
2000-01	18959	25157	4004	48120	39.4	52.28	8.32
2005-06	26904	47218	2929	77051	34.91	61.28	3.8
2009-10	27233	45152	5033	77418	35.17	58.32	6.5

When the urban and rural student proportions of BRAOU are compared with the proportions of urban and rural populations in Andhra Pradesh i.e. 27:73, one may conclude that BRAOU is successfully reaching out to rural and tribal population in the recent years. The percentage of students from tribal areas has also been considerable.

ACCESS TO DISADVANTAGED GROUPS

Social Categories

Table-6 depicts the classification of students enrolled on the basis of various social categories such as Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Backward Castes (BC) and Other Castes (OC). An analysis of this table helps in finding out how far the objective with regard to the realization of equality of educational opportunities for higher education to various social categories is realized.

It is evident from the enrolment of students that the largest proportions are from Other Castes and Backward Castes. The students from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes occupy the 3rd and 4th positions in their proportions. Though students from Other Castes occupied the first position since the inception of BRAOU taking the largest proportion of enrolment until 1998-1999, from 1999-2000 onwards the largest proportion of students is from the Backward Castes taking the first position leaving the Other Castes at second position. When we examine the proportions of SC and ST categories of students with the total students enrolled, it is evident that while the proportions of SC and ST categories of the population are 7.99% and 1.04% respectively in 1983-84, the proportions of these categories of students enrolled in BRAOU were 17.88% and 6.10% in 2004-05. The enrolment these two categories of has further increased to 21.11% and 6.50% in 2009-10. Thus, by comparing their proportions of populations with that of their enrolment in BRAOU, we can conclude that more and more students of SC and ST categories are able to access higher education through BRAOU. It is evident that their proportions have been increasing considerably since the inception of BRAOU. To a large extent this increase can be attributed to the policies of the University taken from time to time with regard to the exemption of their total tuition and other obligatory fees to the students of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Similarly, the percentage of students from backward communities has increased from 29.98% in 1983-84 to 44.75% in 2009-10. This trend in the enrolment reveals that the BRAOU is catering to the higher education needs of the marginalized and disadvantaged sections of population and

empowering them socially and economically. Thus BRAOU is serving the cause of social justice by providing higher education at an affordable cost.

Table-6
SOCIAL CATEGORYWISE ENROLMENT OF STUDENTS IN FIRST YEAR
UNDERGRADUATE
PROGRAMME IN BRAOU (1983-84 To 2009-10)

Year	ST	SC	BC	OC	Total	ST%	SC%	BC%	OC%
1983-84	65	498	1868	3800	6231	1.04	7.99	29.98	60.99
1984-85	189	1263	3092	6700	11244	1.68	11.23	27.5	59.59
1985-86	190	1580	4605	9329	15702	1.21	10.06	29.33	59.41
1986-87	234	1869	6019	11151	19273	1.21	9.7	31.23	57.86
1987-88	189	1653	3659	10770	16271	1.16	10.16	22.49	66.19
1988-89	235	1551	5297	9614	16697	1.41	9.29	31.72	57.58
1989-90	208	1445	5414	9239	16306	1.28	8.86	33.2	56.66
1990-91	582	3048	9864	14010	27504	2.12	11.08	35.86	50.94
1991-92	643	3899	12068	15840	32450	1.98	12.02	37.19	48.81
1992-93	676	4363	13738	16770	35547	1.9	12.27	38.65	47.18
1993-94	674	4196	11206	13265	29341	2.3	14.3	38.19	45.21
1994-95	814	4973	11976	14342	32105	2.54	15.49	37.3	44.67
1995-96	1340	8660	17349	19136	46485	2.88	18.63	37.32	41.17
1996-97	1522	9011	14862	14985	40380	3.77	22.32	36.81	37.11
1997-98	1887	9489	15388	16560	43324	4.36	21.9	35.52	38.22
1998-99	3129	13240	19000	19838	55207	5.67	23.98	34.42	35.93
1999-00	3051	11720	19735	19199	53705	5.68	21.82	36.75	35.75
2000-01	3134	9582	18813	16591	48120	6.51	19.91	39.1	34.48
2001-02	2375	5322	18367	17206	43270	5.49	12.3	42.45	39.76
2002-03	4120	12304	20956	18566	55946	7.36	21.99	37.46	33.19
2003-04	5116	14673	25894	23399	69082	7.41	21.24	37.48	33.87
2004-05	4428	12985	27430	27761	72604	6.1	17.88	37.78	38.24
2005-06	5151	16326	30252	25322	77051	6.69	21.19	39.26	32.86
2006-07	4034	12724	25866	20150	62774	6.43	20.27	41.2	32.1
2007-08	3741	14413	29327	22387	69868	5.35	20.63	41.97	32.04
2008-09	4522	16893	36560	24062	82037	5.51	20.59	44.57	29.33
2009-10	5033	16345	34642	21398	77418	6.5	21.11	44.75	27.64

Prisoners

BRAOU has extended the opportunity of pursuing higher education to the prisoners since 1988.

Table-7

**ENROLMENT OF PRISONERS IN FIRST YEAR UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMME
IN BRAOU (1988-89 To 2009-10)**

Year	Name of the Prison Centre				No. of Prisoners Enrolled
	Charlpally	Rajamundry	Warangal	Kadapa	
1988-89	41	-	-	-	41
1995-96	2	31	-	-	33
2000-01	43	20	19	-	82
2009-10	49	59	43	39	190

Table 7 on the enrolment of the prisoners reveals that the BRAOU has been providing educational opportunities to the prisoners. The number of prisoners enrolling year after year has been impressive, with a marginal decline in enrolment in some years. The interaction with the students by the author at Cherlapalli Prison, Hyderabad and Central Prison, Warangal revealed that the prisoners are considering BRAOU as a “great boon in the lives life convicts and under-trials”.

THE MAJOR FINDINGS

From the analysis of the student profiles and the enrolment in different undergraduate programmes for the years 1983-84 to 2009-10, the following inferences may be drawn.

- BRAOU is becoming increasingly popular as is evident from the increase in the student enrolment by about 1242% over the last 27 years i.e., 1983-84 to 2009-10.
- BRAOU has been able to extend educational opportunities to many sections of the people including socially-disadvantaged groups who cannot afford to join the formal higher education institutions.
- A large number of students enrolled in the University belong to the non-formal stream, who were denied entry into the formal institutions because of pre-entry academic requirements for admissions into conventional courses of study.
- The proportion of unemployed students is more than that of the employed. However, in aggregate terms, the working population is considerably large.
- The urban and rural composition of students of BRAOU 35:65 in 2009-10. There is a need to focus tribal areas so that the educational underserved are addressed by the university.
- Though students from Other Castes occupied the first position since the inception of BRAOU, registering the largest proportion of enrolment until 1998-99, from 1999-2000 onwards the largest proportion of students are from the Backward Castes except in 2004-05. This trend reveals the fact that the

BRAOU is reaching out to socially backward and disadvantaged communities of the population.

The above inferences, which corroborate with some of the findings of the studies conducted earlier by Prasad (1988), Venkaiah (1994), Vijayalakshmi Pandit (1997) and Sesharatnam (2002), show that the BRAOU is in the direction of fulfilling its mandate democratizing higher education in Andhra Pradesh (APOU Act 1982). The findings of this study are by and large similar to the findings arrived at the national level (Vijayshri and Garg: 2000).

For those at, or near the bottom of the social ladder, the first step in their quest for economic betterment and social acceptance and empowerment is acquiring a Degree from the university. Thus, thousands of first-generation learners seek admission to undergraduate programmes in the Arts, Commerce and Science streams in BRAOU.

CONCLUSION

From this study, it is clearly evident that BRAOU has played an important role in social empowerment in Andhra Pradesh by catering to the needs of the aspirants of higher education and meeting the requirements of diverse groups of students including socially disadvantaged sections. In addition, it has been able to establish credibility for distance education by means of its quality assurance procedures.

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