

Learning in the ODL System and Postcolonial India: A Case Study of the Post Graduate Literature Courses Offered by Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi

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Abstract

Learning in the ODL System and Postcolonial India: A Case Study of the Post Graduate Literature Courses Offered by Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi¹

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This paper attempts to examine the Literature Post Graduate Courses Offered by the School of Humanities, IGNOU, in an attempt to establish the relevance of the context within which learning occurs and the contribution that the ODL System makes to such a dissemination of knowledge.

The Indira Gandhi National Open University has been a pioneer in the ODL system in India, since its inception by an Act of Parliament in 1985. Beginning with Foundation Courses in English and Hindi, (the two languages and disciplines this school is comprised of), it moved on to producing course material for the Bachelor's Degree Programmes and more recently, since 2000, the Master's Degree Programme in English has been launched and has had tremendous success. This paper seeks to address the manner in which courses are prepared for the learners of Postcolonial India, particularly by way of syllabus structuring and how, a careful choice of lessons and authors places the learner of the ODL System at par if not better suited than their counterparts in conventional Universities. This paper will also attempt to look at the issues of culture, language and gender as relevant to the learning experience and to capacity building in the long run.

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This paper seeks to analyse the course development process with special reference to the cognisance paid to the cultural hybridity and heterogeneity that the world's largest democracy represents. The Master's Degree Programme in English was launched in the year 2000. In the first year this programme saw an enrolment of a little over 5000 students. Thereafter the MA English Programme has seen a steady stream of students enrolling with IGNOU and the numbers have always been above 5000, except in one particular year when overall enrolment went down. These numbers are a sure sign of the popularity of the programme as a whole and also an indication of the quality of the courses with the large body of students opting for education via the Open Learning System.

The MA English Programme (referred to hereafter, by its programme code as MEG) requires the learners to complete 64 credits in all. The Courses are divided into two parts: I Year Courses and II

Courses. Each Course is of 8credits each. The I year courses include four compulsory courses and the II year includes one compulsory course and three optional courses, from a wide range of courses including the New Literatures as well as Indian Writing in English.

I Year Courses include:

Compulsory

British Poetry

British Drama

British Novel

Aspects of Language

II Year Courses

Literary Theory and Criticism: **Compulsory**

Optional

American Literature

Indian Writing in English

New Literatures in English

Australian Literature

English Studies in India

American Novel

A Survey Course in 20th Century Canadian Literature

And several other courses that are still in the development stage.

The process through which learning occurs in an individual may be through several via media. For instance, while some students show better understanding and comprehension with visuals and graphics, others are more comfortable with print media. No matter what the learning style of individual learners in the ODL system, what is more crucial is the context within which this learning occurs, (by context here is implied, the cultural and linguistic contexts). For a postcolonial country such as India, where English has been the medium of instruction in a large number of schools and where English studies was introduced by the colonial masters to create a body of loyal subjects, who conformed to their way of thinking and life, the entire education policy becomes a political issue. Since independence, the Government of India has formulated several education policies and even the Open Learning System now occupies a pretty central position from it's hitherto, peripheral locus. The attitude towards ODL has changed drastically over the years and where once, the ODL

system was thought of as a poor cousin to formal conventional, education, it is now being hailed as the educational system of the future. The MEG Programme bears testimony to the fact that the IGNOU has followed its preamble and its objectives when planning the courses for the MA English Programme. It not only provides quality higher education for large segments of the population but, also reaches out to the hitherto, un-reached sections of society, such as, the tribals and the scheduled castes in a big way. It has reached out to working women, housewives and other adult learners as well through its various programmes. In a sense, the MEG programme also ensures that, the learners who are mostly adult learners get the opportunity to upgrade knowledge and their skills thereby, leading to human resource development and capacity building.

CURRICULUM PLANNING

The MEG Programme as discussed earlier has several core courses. The Experts felt that the students of the ODL System should be given flexible entry into the programme. Hence, the Programme did not contain any application criteria, such as "having studied English as a distinct subject during Graduation etc". The eligibility criteria, is, such that any body who had completed a three year undergraduate degree, or a higher degree from a recognised university can opt for the MEG Programme. Moreover, it was felt that certain core courses be made compulsory, the reason being the diverse nature of the educational background of students/learners. The first five courses are therefore, compulsory, to ensure that a learner gets a feel of the established canons of Literature. While the first three courses deal with the British Literature component, such as, British Poetry, British Drama and British Novel; the fourth course is an introductory course on Linguistics. The fifth compulsory course is the Literary Theory paper. The optional courses particularly reflect a wide range: American Literature, Indian English Literature, New Literatures, Australian Literature, English Studies in India, American Novel and A Survey Course in Twentieth Century Canadian Literature.

The optional courses that are to be selected in the second year of the programme were designed keeping in mind several issues that were both current and relevant. A lot of writing was to emerge from the erstwhile British colonies, and this literature was then aptly named Commonwealth Literatures. However, with the passage of time, most of these countries under the British Crown became independent, and there was renewed interest in the literature that was emerging from these countries. This body of literatures was to be termed variously such as, New Literatures and more recently, Postcolonial literatures. Hence, the Experts for the II Year Optional Courses of the MEG Programme decided to open up a wide plethora of courses that touched upon all these areas. So, there emerged a traditional course on American Literature, followed by New Literatures and so on.

Not, only were these issues and debates on colonial, commonwealth and postcolonial literatures kept in mind but the learners were also given an option of studying these courses at close range. Having done that, the Experts along with the Faculty of English decided that the contexts of the courses also need to be established for, the simple reason, that studying Australian Literature would be irrelevant to most of our adult learners if the cultural context were not in place. Once the

courses are planned, the curriculum designed then, the course writers hand in the material. The material is then formatted by the in-house faculty and discussed by the course team before it is finalised and sent for printing and finally despatched to the learners.

While it may be argued that the cultural context may or may not have much relevance today with the world being a sub-zero culture as some critics would like to term it, language is still very important in any learning situation. Why is language so important? Because, language has a grammar of its own just as every discipline has a grammar of its own. In order that learning take place, it is essential that the learner has an in-depth understanding of the English language so that it, becomes easy for him/her to grapple with the discipline. Hence, similarly, culture specific contexts too enhance the learning process.

Let us, take the *English Studies in India* Course that has been offered for the first time in June 2006. This course was prepared keeping in mind the postcolonial nature of the Indian nation while tracing the antecedents of English Studies right from its inception in British Universities to its percolation down to India. The Course through a series of 8 Blocks traces the history of English Studies in England, and ends with the motives for introducing English Studies in India during colonial times. It lays out a general plan of study of the issues involved in defining English Studies as 'institutionalised'. The British in India in the 19th century envisioned a path that would cover a whole psyche in due course. From thereon, to the end of the 20th century, English Studies seem to have gone from strength to strength. The number of debates taking place at different points of time only helped to bolster the desirability of English Studies as a necessary component of our educational policy, and also looks at poetry written in India then.

The beginning of Indian Writing in English takes up, some of the issues already discussed under Institutionalisation of English Studies in India and also looks at individual poets for critical analysis and comment so that problems of sensibility formation in a given circumstance are visualised. It also goes over some of the 19th century British debates about the advantages or otherwise of institutionalising English Studies in India and certain other significant Indian interventions in these debates.

Having done that, this course also examines the first English Novel ever written in India- Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya's *Rajmohan's Wife*, and analyses the centrality of Bankim to the map of novel writing in India. It also takes up those areas of discussion that enhances understanding of both Bankim as an author and his English novel *Rajmohan's Wife*. It deals with the question of the contexts that shaped Bankim and his importance as a writer. This block analyses the fact that Bankim was not merely a novelist, but also a political observer, thinker and nationalist. He brought into being what is today called the Indian novel. A detailed textual analysis of *Rajmohan's Wife* and a comparative study of three important (Bengali) novels of Bankim have also been undertaken. The novels enhance our understanding of Bankim's vision. The novels that will be discussed are: *Bishabhriksha* (The Poison Tree), *Krsnakanter Uil* (Krishnakanta's Will) and *Indira*.

This course then looks at the indigenesation of English in a former British colony. The process is looked at from the point of view of the function that English performs. The issue of the integration of a foreign language at the level of discourse, grammar and linguistics aspects have also been taken up. A view has been taken of the interaction between English as a medium within India and in the contemporary world outside. This block also discusses English in the backdrop of a society caught in the web of multiculturalism.

From thereon, the focus shifts to specific problems of teaching and learning English Literature in the postcolonial context and also traces briefly the history of English Literature in Indian Universities before independence. An examination of the trends and nature of the teaching of English Literature in India (TELI) - The consequences of the beginnings of TELI as well as its status in our contemporary context have been taken up. Apart from exploring the negotiation of English Teaching in the classrooms, the Block also examines the material forces that shape English Studies in India. The 'force' included state policies on publishing as a determined trend. This block also sheds light on how this has influenced the trends and scope of the publishing industry

Having discussed the problems of teaching and learning English Literature in India today, the next thing that this course looks at is defining the canon and examines the works of the following critics: Henry Newbolt, Matthew Arnold, F R Leavis, T S Eliot and Raymond Williams. It looks at the Newbolt Reports importance in introducing English as a compulsory subject of study at schools in England. Excerpts from the report and its implications for the students of English Literature have been analysed.

Then, the tough duty of questioning these established canons arises, and provides an overview of the larger argument that encloses a discussion of different essays - namely questioning the already established Canons. Terry Eagleton's approach is discussed as also is Leavis', Bergonzi's and Widdowson's arguments. Beginning with a definition of the term canon, it also explains the social and historical co-ordinates that have contributed to its formation. The ideas of these thinkers have been used to explain the implications of studying English Literature as an unchanging body comprising canonical texts along with an exploration of Hillis Miller's views on the problems within literary theory.

The course ends by taking up issues of cultural decolonisation, of decolonising the mind rather than socio-political structures. Keeping this in mind the students have been made aware of the West's bias against the 'Eastern world', and also get an indication of the way in which people of the world can be imagined as equal participants in a common culture. Questioning the many categories into which the postcolonial world has been divided and the premise on which Third World Theory is based the Block has taken up Jameson's argument in 'Third World Literatures in the Era of Multinational Capital', the link between language, culture, and ideology that Ngugi establishes to analyse the nature and politics of postcolonial African Literature, Achebe's essay "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness" and Namwar Singh's 'Decolonising the Indian Mind' to examine the perspectives of the contemporary writer in today's intellectual climate formed by nationalistic, international and enlightened ideas. There is also a brief account of the process of

colonisation, the struggle and the resistance movements leading to it and the prevalence of imperialism in the so called post colonial world.

Having analysed the curriculum development of this particular course, it might not be too out of place to say that even the other courses included in the MEG Programme keep similar ideas in mind while doing curriculum planning and course development work. For instance, the Australian Literature Course has adopted a similar attitude. It begins with an introduction to what constitutes Australian Literature, moves on to contextualising the Australian postcolonial condition as well as the Australian Aborigines and the various bodies of Indian marginalised peoples, then it locates certain authors who are truly representative of Australian Writing and as yet are part of the global body of writers and then selects their work (s) to be included in the syllabus.

It might also be pertinent to examine the enrolment statistics of the MEG Programme since its launch in 2000.

The enrolment statistics of the MEG Programme in IGNOU indicate that learners belong to various communities and are mostly, mature learners and that most of them are already employed in various capacities (the table detailed here, does not show this data however). Only a tiny percentage of learners are young learners who have enrolled in the ODL System for reasons other than their being employed somewhere. Given below is a table of the learner's profile from 2001 onwards³.

Year	Total	Male	Female	General Male	General Female	SC Male	SC Female	ST Male	ST Female	OBC Male	OBC Female	PH Male	PH Female
2001	5078	2649	2429	1944	2073	118	52	202	190	372	108	14	6
2002	4625	2193	2432	1512	1969	143	113	220	165	301	178	17	7
2003	15467	7016	8451	4734	6824	484	280	594	509	803	445	401	393
2004	7732	3215	4517	2369	3749	6824	484	280	594	509	803	445	393
2005	6795	2808	3987	2341	3606	280	165	152	183	4	1	31	32

These figures are clear indication of the popularity of the course as it provides many learner's with degrees that enable them to enhance themselves in their individual jobs. Most of the learner's are teachers who need a PG Degree in order to teach higher classes or even for enhancing their pay scale. These figures also indicate a trend that is rather unsettling - there is a clear demarcation of gender in all categories except the Scheduled Tribes where there are no such disparities. For instance, examine the figures between male and female learners of the General category, the Scheduled Caste category and the Other Backward Classes category. There is a distinct trend that indicates that male learner's from these categories are more inclined towards the ODL System while female learner's still seem to be shying away from education/upgrading of knowledge and skills. This is on the one hand a positive index for the STs of India but has negative connotations for the rest of the population and may need to be looked into as early as possible.

The kinds of courses that the School of Humanities particularly, the English Faculty have planned and developed for their learners indicate several things:

- That the courses are well thought out and researched before the Experts meet
- The Experts themselves are drawn from the length and breadth of the country and are highly reputed with high academic credentials
- The syllabus/curriculum developer keeps in mind current trends, issues, debates and cultural and linguistic markers that help enhance the course
- A course is not prepared at the whim/fancy of any one person, it is a highly debated, discussed and thought out proposal that has to be put through the rigours of various academic forums before it is finally adopted.

THE MA ENGLISH EXPERIENCE

This author spoke to several MEG learners at several study and exam centres in and around Delhi and learnt that most of the learners (at least 65 %) are adult learners who are mostly employed as teachers/ teaching assistants/ assistant teachers in private, government and semi- government schools. Most of them have enrolled in the MEG Programme as it provides them with flexible learning styles and they can frame their own exam schedules. Moreover, it is the best way to earn a degree while earning a salary as well as running a house and looking after infants or school going children. Of course this data is not qualitative but is an indication nonetheless of the kind of response the MEG Programme is generating and what it means to a practitioner of the ODL System.

Recommendations

The paper has looked at the curriculum development of one particular course in great detail and has also highlighted the need for establishing the cultural and linguistic context for better learning in a postcolonial country such as India. It has also looked at how the ODL System has contributed to the dissemination of knowledge and played a big role in capacity building and developing human resources. But, the figures given above, also throws up startling facts such as the unequal relation between male-female learners within certain categories/communities of people and this may need to be looked into as early as possible.

3090 words

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³ Data generated by the Student's Registration and Evaluation Division, on 28/04/2006.

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