

DISTANCE EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT: THE CASE OF HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION AT THE INDIRA GANDHI NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY IN INDIA

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Whether Distance and Open Education (DOE) represents a paradigm shift in the world of education has been argued at some length; but less arguably one may say that all of us are passing through a global phenomenon characterized by resurgence of a philosophy of pragmatism. Proceeding from the condition of modernity, this global phenomenon is usually referred to as 'post-modernism'. The post-modern world is decentered, constantly changing, without the chains and conventions of modern society. Its proponents believe that the story of the pluralistic contemporary society is being written by a number of narratives and reject philosophical systems of thought that provide some universal standard, as reflected in Adam Smith, Freud, Hegel, Comte, Marx among others. The liberative potentials unleashed by this global movement of pragmatism started manifesting themselves in the new global order during the 1960s and 1970s - the student movement, environment movement, the Information age, the new consumerism, the multi-national capital, women's movement etc.

This time round, all the disciplines including Education working hitherto under a unifying theoretical framework of "modernization" came under assaults from several quarters. Such assaults were premised on newly privileged principles of post-modernism: fragmentation, indeterminacy, intense distrust of "totalizing" discourses and a legitimizing pre-occupation with the "others".

These assaults were strongly aided by new organisational impulses: emergence of new informational technologies, emergence of new social movements emphatically championing their sectoral agenda, and on the aesthetic and cultural plane, emergence of what Jameson calls, "a new kind of flatness or depthlessness", "a new kind of superficiality," "a weakening of historicity" (all these resulting from a break down in the signifying chain of meanings hitherto adhered).

Emergence of Distance and Open Education can be traced to the decline of an education system besieged by anti-modernization assaults. As an important sector, there is more to DOE than a substantial sharing of post-modernist facilities of the new information technologies. Within the education world, it represented a 'new social movement' with a new set of agenda which is expressed succinctly in the logo of Indira Gandhi National Open University set up in 1985 through an Act of Indian Parliament: "Education is a liberating force, and in our age it is also a democratising force, cutting across the barriers of caste and class, smoothing out inequalities imposed by birth and other circumstances."

The scope and objectives of the University as laid down in the First Schedule of the Indira Gandhi National Open University Act have it as a central objective, to promote a culture of rights consciousness for effective empowerment of people through "education, research, training and extension."

Post-modernism is the spirit of our age. Its impact is inescapable. In his 1991 Presidential Address to the Comparative Educationists, Prof. Val D. Rust was cautiously but firmly pleading for perspectivizing education under positive influences of post-modernism when he said that "our task (today) is to determine which approach to knowing is appropriate to specific interests and needs rather than argue some universal application and validity, which ends up totalizing and confining in its ultimate effect."

We may hasten to add at this juncture that pursuits of knowing about "specific interests" must couple adequately (commensurate with the urgency of the problem) with those about "needs", if a segmental education system like DOE is not to repeat the negative effects of post-modernism. Professional educators may forget at their own peril the wise insight of Ihab Hassan that "post modernism is essentially subversive in form and anarchic in its cultural spirit". In other words, it can spell doom before we wake up. It is quite on the cards that the business of academic pursuits which predominantly address market demands may land us up in actually promoting corporate consumer capitalism of the multinationals. Such dangerous possibilities may occur under the gloss and kitsch of the info-tech which distinguishes, in intensity of dependence, DOE from its parental system (referred to today as 'conventional education'). That education has an interventionist role as well to address the areas of social should not be

overlooked for all the profits its new capabilities may cause to flow in. One needs therefore to guard against the possible dangers arising out of DOE's over-dependence on technology use as a central driving force.

Though the first Open University did not come up in the USA, it was the famous American sociologist, Prof. Daniel Bell who can be credited with clearing this focus of dependence on knowledge and information technology which is fast replacing industrial commodity production as "the axial principle" of social organization. The American 'social system' he claimed in his *The Coming Post-industrial Society* (1973), is becoming increasingly characterized by processes in which "telecommunications and computers are strategic for exchange of information and knowledge". He also offered a replacement theoretical plank: "technical knowledge theory of value" is fast replacing "labour theory of value. What in fact Prof. Bell was theoretically articulating is an advancement over an accumulation of similar developments taking place in the USA (particularly), providing the initial stimulus for a transition to be effected in the serventies. As early as 1962, Fritz Machlup's documented evidence suggests that almost half the work-force in the US was engaged in information production and distribution. By 1990, this figure had grown to an astounding 75 percent. By these standards, we are moving only at a "glacial pace" (Alvin Toffler) since our investments are in the opposite direction: need-based heavy investments for commodities and hard infrastructure. The discomfiture of choosing knowledge and information as an axial principle of social organization for the developing countries becomes much too evident for detailed elaboration.

The Report on Knowledge (prepared by Lyotard, a pioneer among the post-modernists) in this transitional period makes an awkward reading, Lyotard was bluntly clear: "the state and/or company must abandon the idealist and humanist narratives of legitimization in order to justify the new goals - in the discourse of today's financial backers of research, the only credible goal is power. Scientists, technicians and instruments are purchased not to find truth, but to augment power".

It is accepted in all the quarters that Knowledge is power; even performative knowledge is effectively powerful. But who ever said seriously before that knowledge is to promote the power of the "financial backers"? Contrast this with a telling incident of the 'modern age'. When it was announced that the OECD intended to convene the first ever meeting of Ministers of Science in October 1963, the then Netherlands Minister of Education is reported to have rushed to Paris to try to persuade the Secretary General, OECD to cancel the meeting. "Science", he argued, "is an aspect of knowledge and its policies are an integral part of cultural policy. To discuss them in an economic environment would amount to prostitution." (Ferrarotti Franco)

Of course, no body in right senses would rule out economic rationalities in culture, education and similar other social areas. For the spinners and weavers of 'abstract theories', post-modernism has called a halt, and rightly so we would argue, to the extent of their failure in accountability. But it should be acknowledged in the same breath that theoretically uninformed pile of data collection and, mindless data-processing may lead to what the American "systems" theorists in early 1950s had characterized as "hyper-factualism". in financial and technologically dependent living conditions (as in developing societies of the world) such intellectual activities may amount (if not directly) to "slave-dredging" (doing for others) or as Antonio Gramsci had graphically described, "scholastic straw-threshing" (much ado about nothing).

One need to be conscious against another danger which comes from the University higher education. An insightful observation from a responsible commentator Russel Jacoby tells us that "all discussions of higher education on both the Left and the Right have been permeated by "an unacknowledged elitism" about the nature of culture and an undue concentration on texts and symbols."

For an appropriate perspective of knowing and doing through distance education mode, the following can be considered important so that the task of empowering the deprived and disprivileged masses is vastly facilitated:

- (I) the concern for "otherness" which is a defining feature of open learning (insomuch as it represents a 'fragmented' notion of education) acknowledges in multiple forms, differences in subjectivity, gender and sexuality, race, class, and conditions of existence. It is this concern which holds the key for an open learner to choose a neo-conservative line (excessive dependence on info-tech for profitable returns to the 'financial backers') or a path-breaking emancipatory line in which s/he uses the same info-tech to richly supplement efforts at spreading the cause of social education through other methods in the kit namely, networking, collaboration and other 'distributional' resourcess.
- (II) Essentials of open learning lie in the nature of socially distributed knowledge. Given the elitist bias of higher education, how can a University be a source of empowerment for predominant majority of the needy people who have been de-accessed and/or short-shrifted? The 1992 Cambridge Workshop on World

Crisis in Education held to review IEC's association with 10 case studies from the Third World, recommended for expansion of Distance Education's potentials at lower levels of education, since DE so far has been mainstreamed at the tertiary level only. But structured organizational biases do not die easily. If the organizational impediment is a fait accompli, how does one innovate at functional levels and with what implications? Then there are questions of 'status', 'resources' and 'recognition' which in any case are not easy to come when open learning is called upon to serve a cause of social education for vast masses who do not generate "demand" for a "knowledge market".(III) The empowering capabilities of ODE critically hinge on its potentials to address questions of access & equity in education. Logically, this leads to greater democratization of education which, in its turn, facilitates immensely greater democratization of the society. Given all these possible promises, open learning can be said to be standing at the cross-roads of history-democracy or dependence is today fast integrating global economy?

- (III) If the goals of DOE can be noble, the methodologies are far more "flexible, time-urgent and multi-model in its shape and substance." Is practitioners need to be aware of theoretical discussions but most of their activity is applied in nature. For its heavy application-orientation, such knowledge needs to be "transdisciplinary, empirically anchored, heterogeneously sourced and organizationally mixed." All these can be utilized as much for the benefit of corporations as for the poor and disprivileged masses in the Third World.
- (IV) Viewed from the stand point of empowerment, open learning has a historic opportunity to prove its credentials to the people of the world. First of all, it has acquired unique capabilities to overcome and address problems arising out of 'historic residues' piling for years. All nation-building experiments of the modern, post-world war II nation-states have only added to this pile. Open learning can plan to benefit from the "genius of post-modernism" which consists in its "ability to transcend time and space, history and geography. It is characterized by simultaneity, incorporating the past into the present, the distant into the local, and by the synthesis of various traditions." Open learning can claim in its own right, strategic advantages of a new shift in style and can have its operations in the changed situation, which can be both "kaleidosopic and simultaneous". For the mounting problems of the developing societies permanently caught up, as it were, in various traps of 'catching up' developmentalism, utilities of such a strategy to combat problems arising out of a vital sector like education, can have few parallels. Add to this an important epistemological development acquiring shape, of late. Earlier people were served through safe and settled categories of knowledge, which were mostly abstracted: system, role, function, institution were topics which constituted direct focus of such studies. The focus now is on the people themselves, how to awaken them, enable and empower them is the challenge in the new set-up. People are no more the problem to be addressed to; they in fact hold the solutions to various problems bedeviling the civil society. Recommendations of the Copenhagen Summit(1994), the Human Development Report (1997) and the Jacques Delors Commission 1996 only serve to reinforce this importance of 'people' as direct change agents.

How can an open learning university handle such empowering tasks? The story of the Human Rights Project at IGNOU represents such a case in the making. That it is still a Project with a reasonably good amount of sanction (3.5 million rupees) indicates that the institutionalization effort is still unfinished. But behind the formulation of the Project, all the theoretical points raised above for making DOE system capable of handling responsibilities to empower people and the professionals, have been confronted. From a hindsight, it is important to observe that human rights education in India received an accelerated impetus with the governmental initiative, following the stipulations of the World Summit on Human Rights at Vienna 1993, to set up the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) later the same year.

With the constitution of the NHRC, there was a jump-start for human rights education, among other priority items. Previous to the Commission's efforts, the story of human rights education in India has been one without any plan or goal. As the Commission notes in its Annual Report 1995-96, the University Grant Commission (UGC) had appointed in 1985 a committee on human rights education under Justice S M Sikri who prepared a report titled "Blueprint for the Promotion of Human Rights in India at All Levels". No follow-up action was taken on this report and as the commission pursued the matter with the UGC in 1995, the UGC Law Panel formulated a proposal for inclusion of human rights in LLB and LLM courses. Ten Universities have been identified and given financial assistance to set up departments of Human Rights. All these are very recent news, the UGC's IX Plan Approached to Promotion of Human Rights Education in Universities and Colleges, the first ever formulated document in the matter came up as late as August-September 1998. There are diverse aspects to human rights education in India but the trend would consist of the following: (a) The organizational distinctions are religiously followed. This makes human rights education, like other disciplines, a mere cognitive affair. What actually is required is to change and

transform the attitude of the learners so that "a culture of rights" sets in. (b) Even as a discipline/subject, the focus has been textual. No instance of any University or College offering experience-based practical courses in human rights has come to our notice. There is also another dimension to such textual excesses initially it was thought to be the preserve of the Law faculty and till date, except Political Science no other discipline appears to be a candidate for course development work in human rights. The only exception to this combination of Law and Political Science Faculties, is the Registrar of the University (Andhra University, Visakhapatnam) who has been given grants this year to develop a two years Masters Course in Human Rights.

Even since the NHRC came into being, focus shifted to training of police, collaboration with the NGOs' campaigning and advocacy for the rights of citizens and groups. In its series of dialogues which the NHRC conducted with the Ministry Human Resource Development, Government of India, the latter always included in its panel, a representative of the Distance Education. The Commission gave a separate mention to Distance Education in its 1996 Annual Report (vide item 6.12) and expected that IGNOU would produce programmes in human rights "using Distance Education methodology".

The word "using" (above) have strong "empowering" connotations because the Distance Education (DE) system in India with IGNOU at its apex was mandated to absorb 50 percent of the additional enrolment during the 8th Five Year Plan ended 1997. So much trust in DE system's capabilities has largely been due to, its widespread, organized network. Besides IGNOU at the apex, India has 9 State Open Universities and 50 Correspondence Course Institutes, 19 Regional Centres and 330 Study and Work Centres. In the DE system, we have a National Open School which, in its turn, has several state bodies as well. Liberal measures of broadcasting facilities have made the presence of distance education registered in the length and the breadth of this huge country. The system depends on about 14000 counsellors drawn from the conventional set up. DE system probably is the widest network in the country which takes quality education in its self-instructional format to the door-steps of the learner.

But when it comes to doing a social education like human rights education it turns out to be a novel experiment in all the sectors : Course design and development, delivery and the objective fulfillment. There are peculiar aspects to all these facets and central to this unique experiment is the emphasis on designing of a learning system which will help promote affective outcomes as much as the traditional, cognitive learning. If human rights learning can contribute to transformation of behavioural attitudes of the learner, the objective of the programme can be said to be fulfilled. Away from the corridors of traditional pedagogy, open learning can have its full empowering potentials put on test because of flexibilities it offers in designing and delivery of the learning package.

Material production has been the most challenging among the empowering capabilities of a DE system.

The material preparation on Human Rights education will entail strategic thinking and action to promote effective acquisition of learning based on experience and day-to-day activities, true stories revolving around human rights heroes but taken from the local histories, conceptual guide books dedicated to inculcation of values of freedom toleration, fairness, respect for reasoning and respect for truth/evidence. Such a strategy would need to employ the activity-based methods for the new forms of teaching and learning e.g. drama, role-play, simulation and mock exercises. It is not only enough to provide the students education in 'procedural' values, more importantly the students should be able to act upon them in ways which may affect their behavioural outcomes. In this sense, the methodology will contribute to generating capabilities amongst students and take them close to the real life (as against one abstracted in books and sermons).

All these will pose challenges for the traditional role of teachers, educational organizations and the nature of education in the society; but true democratization would require that education is more anchored in the social field than in cloistered set-ups and the nature of education is more directed towards learning than teaching.

For an effective translation of the above set of objectives into concrete outcomes towards which human rights literacy programme should aim, the Project would undertake to:

- i) publish dramatized versions of the human rights stories (e.g. with the help of illustrations, story telling, cartoons, computer graphics etc.).
- ii) develop an integrated network comprising the non-governmental organisations and others dedicated to various tasks of social development.
- iii) be of help to various national and international agencies for communication of their social messages to the targeted populations.
- iv) resort to an increased role of the media-print and theatre groups, broadcasts etc.-not excluding the audio/video productions for the message communications.

PROGRAMMES

Pursuant to above objectives, the project will have two categories of programmes namely;

- A. Academic Programmes of Certificate, Diploma and Degree levels
- B. A functional literacy programme aimed at conceptual reorientation in the field of human rights.

- A. The following types of activities are being undertaken in respect of Certificated Programmes in Human Rights.
 - i. Self contained SIMs including comprehensive Audio/Video material as a part of the course package.
 - ii. A compulsory work book for practice-based learning of human rights. This will include a component of the project work also.
 - iii. Counselling support from the local areas.
 - iv. Facilitation of self-learning through mentors (lawyers, human right activists etc.) to be identified by the project office at the learning centres.

These programmes will be based on certification and credits which may be transferred through similar such programmes or related programmes to be identified and finalized by the project office.

- B. In respect of functional literacy programmes in Human Rights aimed at conceptual reorientation, three types of activities will be undertaken:

- i. Being exploratory in nature (and this also applies to the academic programmes to be prepared), it is proposed to hold three workshops on the following topics namely;

- * Concept of human rights in Indian tradition and culture
- * NGO's experiences
- * Networking implications for human rights education

- ii. Production of manuals on different aspects of human rights with a liberal provision of illustrations, cartoons, computer graphics etc. bearing on themes and actual human rights issues in the social, economic and political fields and concerning human rights leaders. These manuals will be of three types:

- a. Messages conveyed through illustrations, cartoons and pictorial demonstrations arranged in one or two page-long folders (stand-alone type)
- b. Small theme-based narratives illustrated and arranged in a couple of pages devoted to discussion of a specific human right or an event or a leader etc.
- c. Handbooks and manuals for training and workshop strategies.

- iii. Partnership arrangements with NGOs working in remote areas are to be worked out by the project office. The ultimate objective will be to contribute towards forging an integrated network of training and education in social development spanning areas of health, education, environment, women, dalit groups etc. This will prove to be an effective delivery mechanism for distance education through a networked mode (usually working in collaboration with the satellite-based and electronic networks available).

The partner to be involved in this networking will have a cost to share with the project office and such partners can have facilities for admissions and examinations of the students on demand.

IMPLEMENTATION

The Project came into existence in April 1997 after the Board of Management passed a resolution to that effect with two provisos:

- (a) A senior academic to head the Project and
- (b) The Project Director will function with a good measure of autonomy. Within a year and half, following activities have already been taken up;
 - (a) Production of three Courses under the Certificate Programme in Human Rights which has received clearance from various statutory academic bodies of the University. The Course will be available for offer in July 1999.

The Programmes is meant for workers in industry and agriculture, doctors, NGO functionaries, police constables and inspectors, extension workers in various sectors of development. Besides the above, an 8-credit Application-Oriented Course in Human rights Studies is also going to be offered to the undergraduate students who are under a statutory obligation to opt for 8 to 16 credits of such courses prepared by various faculties in the University. Among three courses, mention may be made of the third course; Human Rights-What can we do? A 4 credits course, it is largely to be designed and developed by six NGOs who have been similarly busy in human rights initiatives. Learners' performance will be evaluated on the basis of exercises prepared by the NGOs. Evaluation of performance will be totally internal; the Counsellors who mostly are the human rights activists are to evaluate the extent of assimilation of learning outcomes as reflected in interactive behaviour. Further on the Course development side, already eight videos have been produced on different themes and about 8 hours of tele-conferencing-based tutoring and discussion will be taken up next year after the admissions. Copies of Course outlines are enclosed.

- (b) Second set of activities will begin in right earnest from the middle of 1999, through planning towards the same has already started. These activities relate to functional literacy in human rights, as described in the material production strategies above. But important to note in this connection are the steps which have already been taken in planning towards it:
- i. More than 60 percent of the sanction is being reserved for literacy activities.
 - ii. A national Workshop on the theme "All Human Rights for All" was held in March 1998, with 25 NGOs participating in it.
 - iii. Collaboration exercises have been started for two Action Projects on two areas namely Right to Survival and Right to information. The Human Rights Project of IGNOU is interacting with prominent NGOs working in two areas selected purposely (for reasons of backwardness). MOUs have been signed with them. One set of activities has already been taken up to buttress the efforts already in force to provide food security to the people of Kalahandi district. Since the Project Director has been a member of the National Action Plan Committee for Celebration of Fifty years of UDHR, it has become facilitative to connect the govt's various interventionist initiatives with these pockets of needy people.

The story remains incomplete without mentioning a change of direction which has overtaken IGNOU with the change of guard this year only. The focus on extension and social education began last year after at least more than two years' preparatory efforts. It may be too early to announce with any finality, but such extension education has gained in importance and has come to stay in the University with a new shift in style of perspectivization and administration.