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**OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING FOR
MEETING ACCESS CHALLENGES IN
IMPLEMENTATION OF NATIONAL
EDUCATION POLICY-2020**

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OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING FOR MEETING ACCESS CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTATION OF NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY–2020

Ami Upadhyay

Higher Education in India is afflicted with several gaps due to which it is not able to meet the requirements and current demands of the university youth. The NEP–2020 has the potential to fulfill these gaps and provide state of the art education. The success of the policy however depends on its efficient implementation. The policy envisions transforming higher education institutions into large multidisciplinary universities with more than 3,000 or more students each. This transformation requires a huge investment in terms of not only infrastructure but human resource too. The structure and system of Open and Distance Learning Institutions with study centres across the country can play a great role in meeting these requirements cost effectively. They will not only be limited to offering regular graduate and postgraduate programmes, but also be the facilitators in research activities and teaching multidisciplinary and skill-oriented courses.

PRELUDE

National Education Policy–2020 released under the flagship of present Indian Government is forward-looking and aims to fulfill the requirements of 21st century Bharat. It has the holistic aim of transforming the nation to a “more vibrant, socially engaged, cooperative community and a happier, cohesive, cultured, productive, innovative, progressive and prosperous nation” (NEP,2020). It covers the targets of Sustainable Development Goals as well. The success of the policy however, depends on its successful implementation. The policy recommends institutional restructuring while overhauling the

whole Higher Education System. This article examines the policy's vision in the purview of the higher education system and aims to provide solutions for realising the same through intervention with Open and Distance Learning.

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

India has received its holistic and visionary National Education Policy after a gap of 34 years. Nevertheless, the policy would be successful only if it is implemented efficiently. India is currently facing several grass-root level issues such as high level dropout rate, meagre 26.3 % Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), acute crisis of quality, access, equity, etc., particularly in higher education. The system so far has not succeeded in setting the house in order. Moreover, with the fast developments in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and the policies of Liberalisation, Globalisation and Privatisation, there is an urgent need to create global citizens who can work towards the development at local, regional, national and global levels. Obviously, new India requires new approaches to shape the higher education system and the policy's vision, mission and aims must find a ground for its successful implementation through new approaches. One of the approaches which the author finds befitting is mainstreaming of Open and Distance Learning approaches to improve the system both qualitatively as well as quantitatively. In this article it was tried to identify how Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system can reinforce the implementation of National Education Policy-2020. Some of the recommendations along with implementation strategies using ODL approaches are presented here.

LARGE MULTIDISCIPLINARY UNIVERSITIES

The policy envisions transforming higher education institutions into large multidisciplinary universities with more than 3,000 or more students. This transformation requires a huge investment in terms of not only infrastructure but human and other resource also. In the current scenario, it is becoming difficult for the Government to provide sufficient funds for infrastructure and manpower.

Open and Distance Learning universities can come as a support in meeting this requirement cost-effectively through their structure and system study centres. In case of state universities, the study centres cover the whole state. In case of National Open University, the study centres are spread throughout the country. Study Centre means a centre established, maintained or recognised by the University for the purpose of advising, counselling, training or for rendering any other assistance required by the students. Generally, the buildings, infrastructures and manpower of already established formal institutions are recognized as study centres, therefore the cost is reduced to a large extent. In India, there are 16 State Open Universities including two new ones in Punjab and Kerala. They are spread across vast geographical areas, covering every district as well as urban and rural areas in the state they are established. Unlike conventional universities and colleges, the ODL Institutions need not delimit number of seats for admitting the students in their courses. This again adds to reduction in costs. However, the ODL Regulations of University Grants Commission (UGC) and other regulatory bodies are in place which lay down norms for the number of students that can be admitted in order to ensure quality. Still the ODLs have scope for accommodating a large number of students. Open universities also have flexible system which allow them to offer a vast variety of courses ranging from arts, humanities, social sciences, languages, sciences, vocational and professional courses as well. India has a rich heritage of knowledge from ancient Indian universities like Takshashila and Nalanda, which were large multidisciplinary research and teaching universities. The legacy can be best implemented by central and state open universities of the nation.

RESEARCH AND TEACHING INTENSIVE UNIVERSITIES

Since the policy lays equal importance on quality teaching and research-intensive universities, it widens the spectrum of functioning of universities. They will not only be limited to offering regular graduate and postgraduate programmes, but also be the facilitators in research activities and teaching multidisciplinary and skill-

oriented courses. Open universities may be able to execute these activities with more ease, as their faculty, academic counselors and expert resource persons are not confined to one particular premise. Also, many conventional universities are mostly categorised by a particular field, like Sports, Engineering, Technological, or Agricultural; Open Universities on the other hand are more flexible in this regard as through the online or offline modes they can offer courses on a wide range of subjects to students, and also cater to the local needs in the form of offering courses on local languages and local skills. In the 21st century, one is beginning to witness a shift towards ODL and Online Teaching and Learning, which has been emphasised by National Education Policy too. In fact, research through Open and Distance Learning or online modes will be of equal importance as that of formal modes. Open universities can play role as a centre or hub for the research on ODL or online teaching learning.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community engagement is one of the key focus areas of this policy. Open universities can engage in different forms in community service and community engagement. Through the network of study centres, open universities can reach the unreached areas and districts. As a part of holistic education, local population can be enrolled in higher education by engaging them with local industry, businesses, arts, crafts, skills, etc. Environment education, value-based education, management of natural resources, sustainable development, etc., can be easily included in the list of subjects in curriculum and even a set of programmes with the same thrust area can be introduced by open universities to gainfully engage the youth and adults of rural and urban areas through study centres and regional centres across respective states. As a part of social responsibility, open universities also have the scope of adopting certain villages, wherein they will be responsible for education, spreading awareness and providing them with the basic rights. Girls and women can be encouraged, trained and be imparted with skills to make themselves socially and economically independent. Open universities can create a group of

mentors and educate them to create leaders of tomorrow. Hence, all-round community engagement is more feasible with the structure and system of open universities.

GROSS ENROLMENT RATIO

The policy also aims to increase the Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher education from 26.3 per cent (2018) to 50 per cent by 2035. It says, “More HEIs shall be established and developed in underserved regions to ensure full access, equity, and inclusion. There shall, by 2030, be at least one large multidisciplinary HEI in or near every district” (*NEP-2020*). Gross Enrolment Ratio is one of the major challenges that our nation is striving to meet. In this field also, open universities reach out to the under-served regions, where conventional universities have lesser scope. Growth, development and strengthening of open universities can efficiently attract a larger student enrolments. Open universities have the pedagogy which can cater to a number of students by engaging them with self-learning material, academic counseling, extra-curricular and co-curricular activities, training and raising awareness, and more. The policy mentions establishing a large multidisciplinary HEI near every district. Open universities already have a network of study centres established in every district under their territory and this can make a note-worthy improvement in the Gross Enrolment Ratio of the state and eventually the nation.

PROMOTION OF CULTURAL STUDIES AND 64 KALAS/ARTS

This visionary policy establishes that being well educated in one’s language, culture, and traditions is a huge benefit to educational, social, and technological advancement of an individual as well as that of the nation. There is a need to develop a curriculum and pedagogy in the coming years that are going to be strongly rooted in our local culture, tradition, heritage, custom, language, philosophy, and promoting traditional ways of learning. This policy aims at resurrection of lost native treasures such as languages, arts and culture, which are the pre-requisites of creating globally competent,

skilled and dynamic individuals. The policy states: “Students are the prime stakeholders in the education system. Vibrant campus life is essential for high-quality teaching-learning processes. Towards this end, students will be given plenty of opportunities for participation in sports, culture/arts clubs, eco-clubs, activity clubs, community service projects, etc.” (NEP, 2020).

Here, it is to draw one’s attention towards the roles and responsibilities of state open universities to promote the local culture relating to the State, with case of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Open University, Gujarat. Gujarat is a land of cultural richness and diversity, which is the pride or identity of Gujarat— ‘*Asmita* of Gujarat’. Each state open university can be encouraged and funded for establishing a cultural centre, which would be a holistic hub for teaching and research, and also be a reservoir of culture, known as State *Asmita* Centre like BAOU can establish ‘Gujarat *Asmita* and Research Centre’. Gujarat *Asmita* and Research Centre established by state open university will be able to further follow suggestions by the NEP fruitfully, having study centres/learner support centres across Gujarat with local staff and support.

Policy intends to develop HEIs that teach in local/Indian languages; People’s Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI) initiated by the Bhasha Research and Publication Center (BRPC) identified that, in Gujarat, 50 languages including 24 are spoken in tribal regions, 11 of nomadic communities and five from the coastal region. Gujarat is among six states in the country that have over 40 languages. Now having Learner Support Centres in all these regions, it will be surely convenient as well as advantageous for open universities to work fruitfully.

Promoting local Literature can be effectively done by state open universities; well-known laureates of Gujarati literature are Hemchandracharya, Narsinh Mehta, Mirabai, Akho, Govardhanram Tripathi, Mahatma Gandhi, KM Munshi, Umashankar Joshi, Zaverchand Meghani and many more. Literature in the form of *bhajans*, *bhavais*, poetry, novels, and dramas are rich and picturesque, depicting “*shaurya-gatha*” of Gujarat and its “*asmita*”. BAOU has UG as well as PG in Gujarati Literature and the same in Hindi and

English too. Even the courses on Translation Studies add value to literature studies what the NEP talks about.

This will also provide impetus to Translation Studies, translation and interpretation of literary works, and serve as well as support the purpose and workings of the visionary establishment of Indian Institute of Translation and Interpretation with their wide pool of regional and international language experts. It shall encourage the translation of rich and uplifting literature of the nation and provide such books for the interested learners in regional languages. This will also translate great Gujarati literature in Hindi as well as English for the readers and researchers across the globe.

The policy also intends to mainstream the inevitable features of culture such as the knowledge of Music, Festivals, Art and Craft. Gujarati folk music, indigenous to the state, originating from the Barot, Gadhvi and Charan communities, is well-received across the globe. It will also resurrect the use of local musical instruments. Knowledge of festivals reawakens the lost rituals, customs and traditions which are closely related to ancient Indian knowledge systems and mythology.

Promotion of local art and craft, and handicraft skills, is another recommendation made by the policy; art and crafts of Gujarat are most unique and are not only popular within the Indian continent, but also across the world. This industry of art and crafts of Gujarat consists of a number of jewelry, metalwork, embroidery, furniture, clay items, handmade carpets (durries), stone crafts, and other materials. The brass industry in Jamnagar is considered to be one of the largest in India. There are a wide range of embroideries, such as Rabari, Bavaria and Banni embroidery, and Patola embroidery, which is the prime style that stands out from them all. Paintings, Warli art, Tangalia and Woodcraft are indigenous arts, which have turned into major industries. Activities like teaching-learning of art and craft shall promote the craftsmen, artisans, and generate trade and business of the local products. These activities will eventually lead to the success of 'Make in India' movement. Under Recognizing Prior Learning (RPL) Open university can introduce these skill courses helping these industries to flourish as well as strengthening villages discouraging forced urbanisation.

National Education Policy talks of visiting another state for ten days to understand the culture of that state. In this case, state open universities can play the role as a link connecting to cultural study centres of that state. Through these state open universities, students can have easy access to education as well as its art and culture. In the case of Gujarat, the state has many Gujarats within it. Gujarati culture at Kutch is different from Gujarati culture at Dang-Aahava or Dharampur or Bhavnagar or Choota Udepur. So, a state open university if funded and directed in a proper way, can provide every facility related to the cultural studies and research.

It will have everything that will help students to understand the languages, literature, history, mythology, food habits, habitats, art, lifestyle, etc. After staying with university for three or four days, studying the culture and having a glance over it, the learner may choose to visit the part of Gujarat of his own choice.

Cultural studies should not be limited to the school level, but should be an important aspect during higher education as well. The structure and infrastructure of state open universities is such that it has wider canvas in terms of access and reach to the masses of the state. Our university has a robust network of more than 200 study centres/regional centres across Gujarat, connecting major districts as well as interior belts.

Every year, the university enrolls thousands of students; hence, it has the potential to reach out to artists and craftsmen who shall teach arts and skills to generate employable individuals. It might not be possible for some universities to arrange for teachers/trainers for various languages under three language formula described in National Education Policy-2020 or artists for 64 arts. In that case Open Universities can do that quite easily by preparing course content, courses, programmes.

Further, not only higher education, but policy has introduced the concept of teaching home language/regional language to children till the 5th Standard, in this scenario, state open universities can offer their crash courses/certificate courses for training English medium teachers in regional languages. This shall be a suitable and

cost-effective alternative for training teachers to teach in the local language.

Each state open university is linked with its study centres/regional centres across the state; in this situation, each centre can be a Language Lab for training teachers as well as Skill Lab with regards to the promotion of arts, languages and culture. For example, Kutch Centre of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Open University runs a Skill Lab for teaching Kutchi art, culture, language, handicraft, and local skills. Further, to know Gujarat means to know the cities and districts of the state such as Kutch, Dwarka, Champaner, Dang, Chhota Udaipur, Saputara, and more. Each one has its own local language, literature, culture, arts, handicrafts, skills, festivals, traditions, customs, rituals, belief-system, and more.

Moreover, state open university and its own cultural centre can be a potential one-spot destination, providing the flavour of the entire state of Gujarat in terms of Cultural Studies, Translation Studies, Promotion of Arts, Languages and Culture in all the possible forms and means as Gujarat attracts lakhs of tourists every year.

CONCLUSION

Presently, there are 14+2 state open universities in India. If each state open university establishes its own cultural centre, it will prove to be a huge contribution in the successful implementation of National Education Policy–2020 with regards to the “Promotion of Indian Languages, Arts and Culture”. If state open universities offer their Cultural Studies courses and programmes in both online and offline modes across all study centres; it will fulfill the purpose of Choice Based Credit System and Academic Bank of Credit, such that a learner from any state can learn the culture of other states of the nation. Strengthening open universities shall surely increase Gross Enrolment Ratio, promote Open/Distance/Online Learning, and at the same time it will boost teaching-learning-research in the areas of Language/Art/Cultural Studies.

It can be culminated thus, that certain vital issues and challenges that our nation might face in the implementation of this forward-looking National Education Policy can be resolved with Open Universities and Open and Distance Learning system. The policy states, “It is through the development of a strong sense and knowledge of their own cultural history, arts, languages, and traditions that children can build a positive cultural identity and self-esteem.” (*NEP, 2020, pg. 53*) Fact of the matter is that cultural awareness results in an individual’s growth and societal development.

They will be able to create individuals who are rooted in ‘*Bharatiyata*’ and yet possess global competency. Our nation’s Open and Distance Learning system will not only solve the issues of higher education, but will also be instrumental in achieving targets of Sustainable Development Goals and Government of India’s initiatives like ‘*Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao*’, ‘*Make in India*’, ‘*Digital India*’, ‘*Ek Bharat Shrestha Bharat*’ and more, as initiated by the Hon’ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modiji.

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