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INCREASING ACCESSIBILITY THROUGH DISTANCE EDUCATION: A REVIEW OF NEW EDUCATION POLICY 2020

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Abstract

Education plays a crucial role in the development of a country, even at the individual level, education improves a person's cognitive ability and makes them more creative and develop their social skills. Education as per ancient times was to make people realize the purpose of their life; it was to enable them to lead a satisfactory life. The article mainly argues the importance of education being accessible to everyone, here open and distance education can prove to be a blessing for a country like India. The article discusses the role of Distance education in fulfilling the aims of the New Education Policy 2020, which are to make education more inclusive, equitable, accessible, and flexible. It begins with the historical perspective of distance education in India, there are commissions and policies which directly or indirectly supported the expansion of Distance education and improvement in its quality. Distance education, as mentioned in the NEP 2020 also, can be a road towards 100% GER. But even after these years, could we really develop distance education in India? Students who did their studies through Distance mode are still given less importance in comparison to other students. The traditional thinker does not value distance education. Keeping these points in mind, the article briefly discusses the different points of NEP 2020 which talks about Distance Education and How much importance have given to distance education in the policy.

Keywords: New Education Policy, Distance Education, Accessibility of Education, Education Timeline, Education during COVID

INTRODUCTION

The education system has the power to develop any country's socio-economic condition, an inclusive education system is all that can take the growth at a higher level. The New Education Policy 2020 is an initiative in that direction; it was approved on 29th July 2020. The policy came with the vision of a new education system for India, which would be modern, accessible, equitable, and flexible. The former Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) chief, Krishnaswamy Kasturirangan was the chairperson of the NEP 2020 draft panel. Distance education has the potential to reach people at the grassroots level as with this people can continue their education without any accessibility problem. It is complimentary for Adult Education as well because those who are engaged in some economic or social responsibilities and are unable to go to the physical educational institutions; Distance Education comes as a cure for them. It is more inclusive and flexible. Distance education is a means to mass education, it is defined as a kind of education when the students and teachers are separated spatially and temporally.

TIMELINE OF EDUCATION IN INDIA

Ever since ancient times, India had a great position worldwide in terms of education. The schooling system (Gurukuls) and the universities back then were examples of quality education, students worldwide used to study here and people all over the world appreciated the high-quality Education in India. Indians are known for their brilliant brain everywhere. The Vedas, Upanishads, Epics, and Puranas were the source of education back then. The kings used to do big donations for higher Education Institutions in order to make their Kingdom powerful (Scharfe 2002). Although the Brahmanic system did not allow Education for all people, it emphasized making everything divided on the basis of hierarchy, and even the education was accessible for a selected portion of the population. Here came the concern of mass education. No doubt the quality was really good but the education was not for everyone. Later on, the Buddhist moment made efforts to make education accessible for all, but again in the British period, the education was limited to selected people only. The committees and acts during this period mostly talked about English Education. None of these really showed their concern for inclusivity and accessibility of education. Even now 25.96 % of our country's population is not literate, 34.64% of females are not literate in India (census 2011). And this too for mere literacy, the figures of higher education don't show the good picture.

University Education Commission (1948) was the first Education Commission of independent India, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan was the chairman of this commission. The aim was to make Higher Education accessible to everyone without doing any discrimination based on region, religion, caste, and gender. There have always been commissions and policies to make education inclusive and accessible but could we achieve the aim?

Following the University Education Commission, Kothari Commission came in 1964, it is one of the most important commissions of India as it not only deals with all aspects and sectors of education but also based on its recommendations the first Education policy of India was formulated in 1968. Before 6 years of the policy, correspondence courses were already started in India



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and when the policy came it was decided to develop distance education's quality as real-time education. As result, many universities began to offer many courses on distance mode. The first Open University came into existence in 1982 at Hyderabad, known as Dr. B. R Ambedkar Open University. After 3 years of Ambedkar Open University, the world's largest university IGNOU was established. The second Policy on Education came in 1986, which was amended in 1992. This policy talked about making education a lifelong learning process by democratizing education through distance mode. As distance education makes education accessible to maximum people, it eventually makes it more equitable, accessible, and flexible. The distance education council (DEC) was set up by IGNOU in 1991 as the national policy on education 1986, suggested to establish an open university in each state under the support of IGNOU. The council was later withdrawn by UGC in 2012 and Distance Education Bureau (DEB) was founded in place of DEC.

THE POLICY AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

The New Education Policy 2020 is the third education policy of India. But before going into the details, first, we need to understand the concept and scenario of distance education in India and the different policies and the councils which contributed in this field. At the international level distance education received formal recognition in 1982 when the international council of correspondence education was renamed by the international council on distance education. The concept of distance education has evolved with time. Earlier it used to take place through print materials only but now with the development of Information Technology, distance education is being delivered through non-print materials such as computers, laptops, CDs, DVDs, radio, and recorded lectures. Not only the delivery method but also the quality of the education being delivered through distance mode has also improved, yet the commitments towards making it as good as in-person education should be made.

After reading the policy we can say that it has a very progressive approach which is important for any country's development. If alone, education field is strong, the social and economic development of the country would speed up. the NEP 2020 suggested the changes which will have a visible qualitative impact on the nation's education. To achieve 100% enrollment by 2030 and make education equitable and accessible, it has given many suggestions such as; having a multi-disciplinary and holistic approach, making fundamental literacy and numeracy available at the digital platform, ensuring universal access to education, promoting life skills, and making special education zones, etc. The suggestions given by the policy if implemented in a right manner can prove to be a revolutionary policy in the Indian education system.

When we talk of accessibility, the idea of online and distance education comes, the students who belong to a socio-economically disadvantaged group (SEDGs as per NEP 2020) and those who are unable to attend a physical school or college, can take education at distance mode. How the policy makes sure their access to education. The 100% enrollment is not possible only through formal and physical schooling; here comes the importance of distance education. The new education policy 2020 is divided into four parts, i.e., school education, higher education, other areas of focus, and implementation part. In both school and higher education, the policy talks about making education more equitable, accessible, and flexible. At the school level, to make sure their access to education, NEP widen the range of school education by open and distance learning programs being offered by NIOS and SIOS, their A, B, and C level are considered equal to grades 3, 5, and 8 of the formal schooling system, secondary education program are considered equal to 10 and 12. In the higher education part of the policy, "Limited access" is accepted as one of the major problems currently faced by the higher education system of India. To increase accessibility and to make education more inclusive, the policy mentioned some steps to be taken such as providing scholarships to underprivileged students, making the learning material accessible and available to specially-abled learners, online education, open and distance education.

The HEIs (Higher Education Institutions), which are running their programs offline, will have the option to provide the same at online and distance mode. The quality and standards of online and distance mode learning will be improved. This will help in increasing the general enrollment ratio (GER), it will also be helpful in increasing the opportunities for lifelong learning of the learners. The higher education part mostly emphasizes on making the HEIs multi-disciplinary and accessible through online education and open and distance education. The innovation in curriculum framework will be done to promote creativity in ODL and not only the innovation in the development of curriculum framework but the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) will also take care of the standards of classroom interaction both in Physical schools and in Distance education. These steps will be taken to create an effective learning environment as per NEP 2020.

According to the policy, the expansion of online education and open and distance education will be done to make education more accessible and inclusive. Also, when talking of quantity, no compromise will take place in the quality of distance education. The standards will be as good as offline regular programs.



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Here we should not get confused between, online education and Open and distance education. Though these two are similar and sometimes people even use them as synonyms to each other but these two are different. While in both Online Education and Open and Distance Education, the teacher and the student are separated, the online education majorly talks about the teaching-learning process through the internet, e-learning platforms, etc. but on the other hand, ODL fills the gap between teachers and the students through a variety of media such as radio, printed materials, TV, online and occasional interactions, etc.

The aim of ODL as per the policy will be to achieve the global standards of quality. We can say that the NEP 2020 sees the future of Open and Distance Education in India as of Global standard. Not only the school education, but the vocational education will also be delivered through Distance Mode to increase the skilled workforce in India. Although the “Vocational Education” part of the policy does not really talk about its implementation through Distance mode. There could be more clarity about it.

ROLE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN TIME OF COVID

The world could not get over the impact of the Corona Virus yet. No doubt it was a bad experience for mankind in many terms. The countries have faced an economic crisis. Many people had a loss in their business; many lost their jobs and dear ones. Education is one of the most affected fields in the Pandemic. The schools and the colleges got closed since the first lockdown in India. It has been around two years; the first lockdown took place in March 2020 and since then the schools and other educational institutions were closed. During this period, many times, the lockdown was not that much strict and things were allowed such as alcohol shops being open, the essential services like banks and grocery shops were never closed, though all these were also limited to their service delivery up to some extent, but were still running. The people were allowed to go out except on weekends. We can say there were times when things were not that bad when the lockdown was light, but the educational institutions didn’t open throughout this long period. It is just now when the schools and colleges got reopened.

Online Education and distance education played a big role in keeping things on track as much as they could. The education was taking place through online mode only. Even the in-person school converted into distance schooling, we got to know how much we were prepared at it. How much our teachers were aware of IT in education, taking classes online, proving reading materials, and conducting the activities became really hard during COVID. The role of distance education during the time of COVID increased, in many European countries traditional education was replaced by distance education, even in India; after the schools were closed the education was continued through online and distance mode. But as no one was prepared for the pandemic, neither was the education system. The education system worldwide got affected badly by the COVID, but in India especially it had negative effects, as India is not a fully literate country, people here are not very comfortable using technology for Education. Not only students but teachers also faced technical problems in taking the classes, few cases came to light in which students were making fun of their teachers for not being digitally forward. Distance education needs to improve the quality; it is high time we should adopt new methods of teaching and learning. The traditional way of education is a goof but with the development of technology, we should also be developed accordingly and so our education system. The COVID worked as an alarm for us to improve the standard and use modern technology for the teaching-learning process, it will not only keep us updated with the constantly evolving world but also the education will be more accessible and interesting with the help of digital tools.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

At the last, we can say that the New Education Policy 2020 gives many commitments for making the education system of India more Inclusive and accessible. Providing funds, scholarships, support, and encouragement for the students who belong to Socio-Economically disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), being inclusive for all genders, promoting lifelong learning opportunities are few among those commitments. Other than this, the policy also talks about the accessibility of education through Distance Mode. The aim is to expand distance education by keeping quality in mind.

Whenever the concern of quality comes, the policy ensures to make the quality of distance education as good as in-person education. Here I would like to say, every kind of education have their own attributes, we should not use one kind of education as a parameter for another kind of education. Where is the individuality of distance education? We should rather talk about developing it as a unique and full fledged type of education.

Technology is developing day by day in India, the inclusion of IT in distance education should be increased and the campaigns should be driven to spread digital literacy so the maximum people will be able to continue their education through distance mode. After completing the education when students go for job interviews many times students who did their studies through regular schooling are given preference over those who did their education from distance mode. Why we are talking about inclusion and the quality of distance education if, in the end, we are going to do discrimination based on their mode of study. The mindset of people is responsible for it but



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at the same time there is one more reason, that is the monitoring and testing in Distance education. Like, students, when they give exams or any assignment, they have the option to copy it from other materials, maybe from the books or these days from the internet. The test in distance education should be designed in such a way, which could test the knowledge level of the students properly. In many open universities, the question paper is given for the assignment, one just need to answer the question and he/she will get the marks. In distance education, the interaction between teachers and students is not as high as in traditional formal education, that's why the assignments should be designed to make students interactive and use their creative thinking. Even the New education Policy 2020 talks about the importance of creative thinking and the development of cognitive abilities.

If we succeed in developing the Open and Distance Education of India, the 100 % literacy rate is not so far. India is a big Country with 138 crores population; economically, people here are majorly engaged in primary sector activities. being a developing country, India needs to works on its education system as mentioned in the initial paragraphs of this article. this is what is needed for the socio-economic development of a country. The NEP 2020 has come up with the many revolutionary suggestions but it could have given lighter to Distance Education. Despite this, the policy has a very equitable and inclusive approach and we can expect good results if it will be implemented well.

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