

Chapter 18

Transformative Learning and Online Education: Indian Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Education is an organic entity and it evolves continuously to cater to the emerging needs of a society. In India, the educational system has changed over the centuries and with it transformed the way teaching-learning is transacted. Education has changed from 'art to craft to technology'. Now we are witnessing technology-induced knowledge revolution. National boundaries and location of learner in spatial and temporal dimensions have lost significance. A learner on an atoll in the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean can learn a subject of her / his choice online, provided s/he has access to a computer, Internet and other wireless communication tools. A vast variety of online platforms are now available to meet the diverse needs of learners. In this chapter, the authors have discussed how open education in general and online education in particular has performed the role of transformative learning in India. They have also discussed various aesthetical and purposive issues addressed by online learning environments to create an egalitarian society.

1. INTRODUCTION

India is the second most populous country (with over 1.2 billion people) in the world. She enjoys the benefits of a treasure of rich cultural heritage and vast diversity; spoken dialect changes at every eight kilometers and as many as 325 languages are spoken. We do not have to reach back very far in

history to know that life expectancy was not beyond 30 years. It increased to 64 years in 2008. The infant mortality has dropped from 47 to 24 per 1000 births in sixty years of our becoming an independent nation state. We enjoy better food security now than ever before because of green and white revolutions brought about by employing scientifically developed new strains of wheat, rice, pulses, and other food plants, as also rearing improved quality of animals. The famines and epidemics that ravaged

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villages, talukas, and regions are things of the past; our granaries have been full even in times of droughts and any new strain with the potential for a pandemic is cracked within days by the researchers. We belong to the exclusive space club and our IT expertise is widely acknowledged as it is significantly contributing to the knowledge economy. Our graduates are respected everywhere for their ingenuity and analytical capabilities. This has become possible because Indian education system always laid particular emphasis on discipline and advanced knowledge. We take pride in our ancient glorious centres of philosophy and learning at *Takshashila, Nalanda, Valabhi, Kanchi* and *Vikramshila*. These flourished with time and several foreign scholars from all parts of the then known world visited these centres in search of wisdom and new knowledge in areas such as logic, grammar, medicine, metaphysics, arts and culture. Unfortunately, these institutions of eminence were destroyed by external invaders and under those circumstances new universities of same level could not be raised. However, despite decline, the tradition of advanced learning continued in medieval and modern times.

When India became free in 1947, this heritage and resilience made everyone to have faith in the wisdom and intellect of our people, though we inherited an education system designed and established to serve the British. The complexity of the problem and magnitude of difficulties was multiplied by the fact that at that time only one out of five men was literate and female literacy was abysmally low (2%). The higher education system comprised 18 universities and 496 colleges catering to about one hundred and fifty thousand students. Moreover, all these institutions were traditional. In a sense, higher education was only for the privileged few. But forefathers of Indian Republic were convinced about the creative role of education and planned for a paradigm shift from an elitist system to an egalitarian system founded in the cherished ideals of national pride, secularism, pluralism and inclusiveness. A systematic

reconstruction in mission mode followed; higher education was accorded top priority—creating Constitutional provisions and supporting these through Five Year Plan documents and budgetary allocations. As a result of these efforts, the system expanded @ about 10% in the 1950's and 1960s and 5% subsequently. But one of its major weaknesses was predominant dependence on full-time institutions, which had inherent inflexibilities and limitations. Also, the financial support to higher education was rather limited; only about one percent of GDP was allocated. These and such other factors combined to restrict access to equitable opportunities for higher education. But the system continued to grow and 'more of the same' kind of institutions were created.

In 2010, more than 480 universities (including Open Universities, Deemed to be Universities and other specialized and exclusive tertiary level institutions for science, technology, medicine, agriculture, law and management) and 22000 colleges catered to about 12 million students located in cosmopolitan cities as well as far flung towns in remote areas. The situation in respect of women education has also now significantly improved; to encourage their participation in higher education, special colleges and universities were created. Similarly, due to positive discrimination policies, the socially marginalized, educationally backward and the poor find adequate representation in admissions in all public funded premier institutions of higher learning. As of now, more than 88% students are enrolled in undergraduate programmes, about 20% study science, 5% study engineering and technology, 3% medicine and about 1.5% students are pursuing courses in agriculture. About 40% are women (up from 2%) and about 12% students are from disadvantaged communities (Garg et al., 2008a). Compared to the number of institutions at the time of independence in Indian higher education system, the increase is about 25-fold in case of universities and 42-fold in case of colleges. Moreover, it is the third largest in the world. Yet it can cater to

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