

Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU): Bridging Academic Divide in India

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Abstract— As India enters Amrit Kal of 75 years of independence; it is looking towards attaining status of ‘knowledge society’ by brining basic structural reforms in the education sector through New Education Policy-2020. Moreover NEP 2020 policy proposes the revision and revamping of all aspects of the education structure including its regulation and governance to create a new system that address the bottlenecks by way of bringing desired institutional changes in the existing educational system to the doorsteps of its entire population within next 25 years with hope to develop sound and robust educational system. But the expected outcomes of NEP 2020 remain a big challenge and goal of increasing GER to 50% by the end of half of 21st century isn’t going to be an easy task. However with positive note the GOI committed to remove bottlenecks and prioritize the needs to revamp knowledge with tradition, through which it visualize to become soft power and knowledge society by 2047. The education opportunities for rural enmass, which accounts for nearly 70% of the entire population lives in rural India and they have access to education is less than half of their urban counterparts. This noticeable rural-urban divide can reduce only by IGNOU, which is prospective contributor to accommodate a large number of students through ODL mode with its Pan-India network. The issue of the “Academic divide” is not new to India. Indeed the existing gap between the “haves” and the “have nots”, has been identified as a potential contributor to the widening knowledge gap within India. Ever since independence, the Government of India has implemented various educational policies to bring parity between urban and rural structures to create equal opportunities, but over the years policies have failed to address basic issues including providing universal and comprehensive education, confronted at rural areas and expected results became distant dreams. Eventually, the unbalanced distributions of the higher educational institutions have also played a critical role. Indeed, NEP is an attempt to bring institutional and structural changes in the existing educational system in India. Bringing desired changes in the current education system is herculean task. Despite many positive aspects of NEP, the advancement in educational pedagogy will certainly pose big challenge. Therefore an essential part of the challenge is of narrowing access to rural areas and focuses more on

urban centers. This gap is spreading which lead to emergence of urban monopolies in the education sector. The question is whether IGNOU benefits can be sufficiently diffused to have a major impact on rural divide. This brief paper summarizes some of the more challenging aspects of the “Academic divide” in terms of its impact on bridging the urban-rural gap. It outlines the problem of educational divide on what scale and identifies obstacles that causing knowledge divide and how we can use IGNOU setup in reducing gap between haves and have-nots in India will be dealt at length.

I. INTRODUCTION

Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) is first of its kind national open central university in India, established by an Act of Parliament 1985. The very objective of the IGNOU as enshrined in the Act Section 4 and 7 shall be to advance and disseminate learning and knowledge by a diversity of means, including use of any communication technology, to provide opportunities for higher education to a large segment of the population and to promote the educational well being of the community generally, to encourage the open university and distance education systems within the existing educational pattern of the country and to coordinate and determine the standards in such systems, and the University shall, in organizing its activities, have due regard to the objects specified in the ‘First Schedule’.

Ever since its inception IGNOU committed to serve underprivileged and downtrodden with intention to uplift the educational needs of the rural masses. With the advent of IGNOU brought paradigm shift in the field of Open Distance Learning (ODL) mode by adopting with new technologies. It brought forward who were located remotely and hails from far flung areas by providing equal access by instituting an ODL system of learning and teaching. Over the years ODL system has gone through drastic changes, suits to cater

the requirements of the learners. Indeed, there are several factors influenced by way of socio-economic settings of the learners, economic conditions and technological development of the regions, which are crucial in deciding the designing course structure. Moreover, the IGNOU has mandate to provide alternative platform for the deprived and disadvantaged sections of the society. Indeed IGNOU has imbibed to embark upon latest technological advancements in the form of e-learning, virtual learning and digital university. Though these attempts have an inherent aim to make higher education 'borderless', but it is criticized for creating a 'digital divide'.

II. SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND EDUCATIONAL PROFILE OF INDIA

Education in India remains one of the most important socio-economic challenges. In spite of a Government commitment to bring desired changes through NEP-2020, the gender gap in literacy rate also remain very high, up to 30% in some states. It is true that in the yester years the educational reforms increased consequently the overall enrolment rate, but despite this improvement, half of the rural students could not reach for formal educational institutions. Improving education is now one of the Government's first goals in order to boost the country's economic growth. Plans are underway to develop academic infrastructures, especially in rural areas, in order to facilitate access to education for all.

Whereas, it is observed that increases in inequality appears to be driven by factors such as rationalization, the unbalanced distribution of educational institutions have also played a critical role. Despite the many positive aspects of recent developments in education sector especially advances in technology has made it easier for the emergence of new mechanism mainly within the hands of learners in large urban centers. Therefore, an essential part of the challenge of narrowing academic gaps more in rural areas invite special attention. Several studies have also shown that there are clear benefits from increasing connectivity in urban centers, but the same has different story all about in rural areas. The question is whether these technological advancements and its benefits can be sufficiently diffused to have a major impact on rural

scenario. The Academic divide between urban-rural is a tangible gap that requires thoughtful and pragmatic solutions. While acknowledging the need for restructuring, it is crucial to recognize the inherent constraints we face in rural India. The relationship between academic divide in India has been marked by a certain complexities.

III. IGNOU: BRIDGING ACADEMIC GAP

The ongoing debate surrounding the efficacy of academic urban rural divide has been a topic of considerable discourse. Addressing the heart of the matter involves aligning the core objectives of NEP as well as the universities so that there is a true win for all. Currently, there exists a significant void between these two realms urban-rural that needs to be bridged. However, amidst this dichotomy, an overlapping space presents itself where both can meet each other halfway. One potential model in India is IGNOU, which can bridge urban-rural gap by expanding its horizons encompassing various methods of imparting education. Currently IGNOU has a Pan-India presence through five zones viz., North, South, East, West and North-east. It has study centers /LSC in remote and inaccessible areas like Campbell Bay, the southernmost part of Indian Territory. Similar LSCs situated across borders to cater the needs of the remotely situated villages of India. With vast network of 69 Regional centers and over 2005 Learners Support Centers (LSCs), IGNOU has been instrumental in providing quality education to a wide range of individuals. Currently IGNOU offers a wide range of programs and dedicated schools involved in quality research works, patents in various fields and innovation clubs for skill enhancement courses that cater to diverse needs and interests. From Undergraduate to Post-graduate degrees and to PhDs, diploma and certificate courses besides it offers a plethora of options for learners to choose conveniently exam schedules accordingly and pursue higher education at their doorsteps by enhancing skills to cater the market requirement. IGNOU, the mega university has started with 02 programs in the initial years and over the years it gained trust among learners by ensuring delivery of study materials ie., best notes available in the market, timely conduct of exams and awarding degrees to the qualified candidates has been gained national character in distance mode expanded

from nothing to unlimited access to higher education courses or exploring new subjects, IGNOU ensures that there is something for everyone. With 25 Overseas Study centers presence, it has reach to almost 57 countries across the globe. The University is also offering 308 ODL programs besides 45 online programs.

In the recent past IGNOU has implemented several initiatives recommended by the NEP-2020 through its extensive network of Regional centers across the country. Notably it has launched 19 programs under Four year Undergraduate Program (FYUP) based on the UGC guidelines and has the multidisciplinary component. IGNOU is also progressing significantly in innovating cost-effective methods to enhance the learning process through implementation of online initiatives in different learning and teaching activities, acknowledging the pressing need for such measures like teaching and study materials in regional languages for the convenience of the learners. Indeed this will boost and also helps the rural learners to study in their comfort of language. During 2019-20, IGNOU had cumulative student strength of over 3.3 million learners with annual growth of 17.4% new learners. IGNOU has been successfully carrying out its mandate of inclusive education as clearly indicated by the fact that out of its student population, 45.3% are women; 12.2% ST; 18.4% SC; and 18.3% OBC student. It is a matter of pride that 45.2% of IGNOU's learners reside in rural areas and 2.4% of learners reside in tribal areas of the country. It is noteworthy that the University has enrolled 5,019 overseas students and 7,381 Defence personnel from Assam Rifles, Army Air Force and Navy. Recently IGNOU and Indian Defence forces entered into MoUs to impart necessary Academic requirement to newly recruited personals under 'Agnipath Scheme'.

One of the potential reasons for academic divide is that concentration of high quality universities, institutes and colleges are having Metro-Politian presence. A benefit of such institutes goes only to the city dwellers and not even who live threshold of cities. In this scenario the academic divide between urbanites is a matter of concern. While acknowledging the need for change, it is crucial to recognize the inherent constraints of academic divide. The responsibility of shaping educational policies to cater the needs of

urban-rural setup comes with its own set of challenges. Striking the right balance between urban-rural is very much necessary to bring down disparities. Therefore, particularly in this context, with a burgeoning emphasis on initiatives like creating institutions at par excellence is necessary, but at the same time the importance of fostering capabilities at rural areas also essential. This stark contrast is evident when comparing urban-rural divide in India. Thus, IGNOU could be a potential solution that could prove to be transformative in establishing state of art infrastructure at rural areas with the help of Universities can jointly invest in cutting-edge technologies. The success of such initiatives rests on both entities IGNOU and other educational institutions having stakes in rural areas proactively establish centers of excellence to provide quality education to rural areas. The success of such initiatives rests on both IGNOU and other University entities treating bridging divide between urban-rural with the gravity they deserve. There is a need to proactively set up best educational institutions in partnership with universities, signaling a shared commitment to advancing knowledge and innovation at rural centers.

CONCLUSION

Despite the progress made in urban areas, the Academic divide between rural and urban India remains stark. India has more than 6 lakh villages while there are around 7,000 towns and urban centers. Out of a total population of the country, the share of urban population has been 31%. On the contrary, in the past, the economic policies have primarily focused more on urban centers neglecting rural areas for various reasons. However, the present government under PM Shri. Modi in the center is focusing more on equitable distribution of resources. The academic divide also includes poor digital infrastructure in villages and limited access to digital facilities between different genders needs to be overhauled. The urban-rural divide in education presents a multifaceted issue, encompassing various factors such as infrastructure, teacher quality, curriculum availability and digital literacy.

In this context IGNOU stands as beacon of accessible, affordable and flexible education to a diverse demography through by instilling quality education to

cater vast landscape through its open and distance learning and Online (ODL & OL) programs as envisaged in its advocacy for democratize higher education, breaking down barriers and reaching unreached corners of the country. Further IGNOU committed to bridge the gap between the conventional education system and the aspirations of millions of individuals who are eager to enhance their skills and knowledge. In the last four decades IGNOU has set itself own records and performed beyond its expectations for leaving no stone unturned. Their commitment to providing quality education to all is truly inspiring and democratizing learning opportunities for individuals across India and abroad. In their latest collaborations with foreign universities including Kenya is worth mentioning and these partnerships aims to take their mission to a global level to empower learners across the globe.