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**REIMAGINING INDIAN OPEN UNIVERSITY  
SYSTEM FOR THE DIGITAL AGE  
MANAGERIAL PERSPECTIVE**

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# REIMAGINING INDIAN OPEN UNIVERSITY SYSTEM FOR THE DIGITAL AGE: MANAGERIAL PERSPECTIVE

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*Establishment of open universities heralded a new era in the higher education system in India. The open universities have brought more credibility to the Open and Distance Learning as a legitimate method of education. It has provided cost-effective educational opportunities to a large number of people in the country, particularly those who could not pursue formal education for one reason or the other, which includes geographically remote and socially disadvantaged learners in large numbers. It also provides lifelong learning/continuous learning opportunities to working population for skill upgradation and life enrichment. In course of time it has become a small system with huge expectations. Enlightened leadership with pragmatic vision, competent and motivated staff, adequate technology infrastructure and flexible professional management are the four pillars of the open university system. In a systemic view, weakness in any one pillars effects the system as a whole. Different levels of deficit in these pillars is leading to existential threats to the system. For bringing sustenance and fulfilling the expectations, every OU (Open University) should prepare its own 'reform agenda' reflecting its context. Reimagination of OU needs understanding of the past as well as current technologies, with a passion for its foundational values and vision for the future.*

## PRELUDE

*"It must be considered that there is nothing more difficult to carry out nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things".*

—Niccolo Machiavelli

We are living in the present with past memories and future hope. The Open University (OU) system is an institutional form of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in India. It is an account of inside-outside reflections of our past memories and future hopes located in the opportunities and challenges of present OU system. We are using ODL as an umbrella term for all forms of technology mediated self-learning supported by institutions. The purpose of ODL is to provide more access to quality education at affordable cost to self-learners mediated by technology. In India ODL is provided broadly by three institutional forms, i.e., Open Universities (dedicated ODL institutions), Dual Mode Universities (conventional universities providing ODL) and Stand Alone Institutions (non-affiliated institutions). The focus

of discussion in this paper is the OU system, may be with some general references to ODL system across (Prasad and Venkaiah, 2005). Reimagination is examining the alternative possibilities of structures, processes and behaviour of Indian open universities to enhance their ability to be in the present moment, the moment being characterised as the 'digital age'.

## **HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY**

Establishment of dedicated single mode open universities heralded a new era in higher education system in India. The OU system is around four decades old, the first OU being established in 1982 in integrated state of Andhra Pradesh, followed by a national OU in 1985. There are at present one national OU, 14 state public OUs and two state private OUs. It is a small system in terms of number of universities constituting less than two per cent of total 995 universities/university level institutions in the country. In terms of total enrolment in ODL, during the last five years from 2014 to 2019 it is around 11 to 12 per cent. It is a small system with huge expectations. It may be appropriate to look into the drives for establishment of dedicated OUs to appreciate their original intentions. Their foundational goals/drives include:

- To meet the increasing demand for higher education;
- to provide quality higher education to 'more with less for more' and to reduce the cost of provision of higher education;
- to overcome the limitations of time and space in providing higher education by adopting flexible technology mediated self-learning mode;
- to bring more focus and credibility to distance education by innovations in methods and by offering relevant programmes in diverse fields; and
- to provide lifelong learning/continuous learning opportunities, more particularly to in service people, for skill upgradation and life enrichment programmes to all.

Reflecting on the past experience of functioning of OUs, keeping the foundational goals as assessment markers, we may identify some significant system contributions which include the following points:

- The OUs have brought more credibility to the ODL as a legitimate method of education;
- more educational opportunities were provided to a large number of socially disadvantaged groups of learners;
- a large number of educational resources are made available in print and audio-visual forms;
- the higher education provision is made more cost-effective; and
- lifelong learning/continuous learning opportunities were provided for working population for skill upgradation and life enrichment.

The above are some of the notable contributions of the OU system. We have also inherited some systemic concerns which include:

- The OUs are focused more on the ‘openness’ dimension and less on the ‘university’ dimension, resulting in the institutions becoming more of agents for delivery of education, not contributing much to knowledge creation and extension.
- To make the system cost-effective, most of the OUs have a very small size of its own internal systems of knowledge resources in terms of small number of full-time teachers. It resulted in making the system a dependent model, may be with some advantages in early phase, and the same becoming a limitation over a period of time.
- The OU system is mainly a print-based distance education system, supplemented by audio-video mode with limited use of internet. This mono-mode is a major limitation in enriching the learning experience of distance learners.
- The governance system of OUs is mostly the prototype of conventional system. The system mostly lacks professionalism in operations resulting in inefficiencies in delivery systems. Leadership deficit is also observed in many institutions.
- The system is ineffectually over regulated.

The present context is a product of past, which includes both positive and negative aspects. The patterns and trends of the past were identified, with awareness of honourable expectations, to understand the broad features of historical trajectory. In the following sections, an attempt is made to address the issues and desired responses from managerial perspective, keeping in view the interest of multiple stakeholders in the system. The present pandemic of Covid-19 has many lessons to take note of in reinvigorating the system. The pandemic has made the ODL a more legitimate and responsive system. It has also resulted in many challenges, mostly in terms of increasing competition, the need to address more divides in the society and raises questions of structural adequacy. In the following sections, multiple concerns are presented by raising relevant questions with the belief that reflective practitioners can address the challenges.

## **RELOOK AT POLICY FRAMEWORK**

Policy in a democratic context is the expression of public will. It sets the goals and ways of achieving them. Presently, there is no national ODL policy in place. The ODL system is operating on the basis of the earlier National Educational Policies (1968, 1986-1992), recommendations of various Committees and Commissions from time to time and HRD Ministry directives and UGC-ODL regulations. Many experts in the field of ODL for long are advocating for a national ODL policy to bring more clarity and direction to the place and role of ODL in higher education. In the context

of Covid-19 pandemic, there is an urgent need to critically look at public policies and practices in ODL from their relevance to the 'new realities'. In this regard, the Commonwealth of Learning has developed very helpful documents to guide the commonwealth countries in developing appropriate responses (Commonwealth of Learning, 2020). Despite 60 years of ODL experience in India, shared understanding of ODL philosophy and response to problems are missing among academic community, policy makers and educational administrators (Mishra, 2020). In the present times, everyone is advocating the relevance of online and distance education. Those of us who were a part of ODL from the beginning have passed through the phases of ridicule and resistance to distance education. It is nice to hear the loud chorus on virtues of the system. But we are not sure of commitment and understanding of many converts to the basic belief system of ODL. It is necessary to reiterate the belief system of ODL and emphasise the importance of making it a part of policy framework. The core elements of ODL foundational beliefs/values include:

- It is a public development good for more access to quality and affordable education, not a commercial activity;
- Technology mediated mode of education is a legitimate form of education for certain categories of learners and learning outcomes are more important than modes of education;
- It is a mode of education relevant for all types of programmes;
- Learners should be prepared and motivated for self-learning; and
- Institutions should be structured appropriately for technology mediated form of teaching-learning.

An important aspect which needs look into the policy frame is the relevance of single mode OU system. The OU in India is a historical product of social necessity, mainly influenced by British Open University model. In 80's and 90's, policy makers expected one OU in every state. The desire is not realised. There is a stagnation in the growth of number of open universities. During the two decades of 21<sup>st</sup> century, only six states have established OUs in contrast to exponential growth of conventional universities. There is also an overall stagnation in the growth of enrolment of ODL system during the last five years from 2014-2019 with only around 11 to 12 per cent of total enrolment, though the expectation was to enroll about 30 per cent of total enrollment in higher education.

In this discussion on relevance of single mode institutional form of ODL two recent developments are to be noted. In 2019, the government prepared a draft National Educational Policy. It is a voluminous report of 482 pages, which rightly emphasised the importance of ODL mode and made a number of recommendations for strengthening of ODL system, without not even once mentioning OU system (Kasturirangan, 2019). The new policy envisages all the universities and colleges, properly equipped, becoming multimode institutions offering conventional and

ODL programmes. Does it convey any signal to the world of Indian open universities to relook at their role? Second important development in the present context is the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on the nature of educational system in general. Most of the prestigious public and private educational institutions are moving towards blended and online modes of education. The open universities continue to depend mostly on the print mode. The question to be addressed is, can the mostly stagnant OU system face the competition from more resourceful and dynamic public and private conventional university system in the provision of education through ODL?

In the 60 years of historical experience, it is interesting to note that the open universities have emerged as single mode ODL system as a response to the limitations of dual mode system of ODL. In the changed context of synergy of modes, multimode including conventional and distance is emerging as preferential institutional form. This form is popularly called a blended mode. Is it not time for OUs to examine the desirability of becoming multimode universities, without losing their identity as OUs, may be with a different meaning and focus. In the blended mode, 70:30 combination of conventional and distance mode is an internationally preferred ratio. The same may be applied by open universities with 70 per cent distance programmes and 30 percent conventional programmes with same 70 and 30 per cent in modes of delivery of teaching and learning.

The issues need a dispassionate critical examination with open mind. We understand that a few years back IGNOU leadership has made some hasty attempts to make IGNOU a dual mode university which was abandoned by the successive leaderships. This reform became the casualty of predecessor-successor syndrome of successor undoing the work of predecessor. These leadership centric responses cannot ensure the sustainability of institutional reforms. The reforms should be based on well informed judgment and system-based consensus. We feel that the idea of OU becoming multimode is worth examining with open mind. A creative response is the need of the hour.

## **REENGINEERING THE INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK**

Re-engineering of institutional framework is necessary to improve the performance of open universities as most of them are suffering from common cold problems of timely provision of study materials, conduct of examinations and declaration of results on time, etc. The management systems are highly hierarchical and rigid. These features may not be peculiar to open universities (Bates, 2015).

But certainly, the consequences of these features are more adverse in OU system, as teaching-learning in this system is more institution centric. In respect of administrative operations, procedures have precedence over results. In our desire to have equivalence with university status of conventional system, we have acquired some of their negative features with more serious consequences. Paradoxically, in this technology mediated form of education, most of the open universities have very weak techno-structure in

place and are burdened with a large number of unprofessional staff at lower levels. Leadership deficit and integrity deficits are observed in many OUs and many of them do not have full time vice chancellors for a long period of time.

In our desire to make the OUs cost effective, the system started with a small number of academic staff depending mostly on outside expertise to develop the learning resources and teaching activities. Initially, it worked well with lot of enthusiasm of outside experts to contribute to the development of learning resources. Over a period of time, for various reasons, it has become difficult to get the services of capable external resource persons to develop the learning resources. The limited academic staff who are used to managerial functions in resource development are finding inadequate to the task of development of learning materials. In most of the OUs, even the limited sanctioned positions are not filled. For example, in Dr BR Ambedkar Open University, the first OU in the country, the sanctioned academic staff strength is 85 and the staff in position in 2020 is only 36. The same may be true of many other open universities as well. In this context of fast developments in the use of new technologies in ODL, we have to look into the competencies of staff in using these technologies. We have to redesign our human resource development systems to take best from the present staff and to attract the best talent to future positions.

Institutional autonomy is a major concern of OU system in India. The regulatory systems in general are becoming highly centralised, rigid and discriminatory. Instead of following the principles of 'trust, but verify', they are following the principle of 'doubt and verify'. This is true more for the open university system. There is a need to relook at the regulatory system from perspectives of flexibility and institutional autonomy—the two cardinal principles of effective institutions.

There is a need to relook at academic organisational frame. Presently, it is discipline/faculty centric as is in conventional system. In view of interdisciplinary and interdependent nature of academic functions in OU, 'programme-centric' academic structures may be more appropriate than discipline-based structures. May be within the broad framework of discipline/faculty area of studies, 'programme-unit' may be created with operational responsibility for total academic operations of that particular programme. Project Mode or Taskforce Mode may be used for learning resources development and for other specific tasks which provides more flexibility in engaging experts and in completing the tasks on time.

In the context of new national focus on '*Atmanirbhar Bharat*' (self-reliant India), open universities should strive to become '*Atmanirbhar Universities*' in academic, administrative and financial matters. More extensive use of e-learning Open Educational Resources (OER) and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) shall make OUs more self-reliant in learning resources. The government of India and University Grants Commission (UGC) are taking a number of commendable initiatives to strengthen e-technology infrastructure and to develop new policy and regulations for online education. The SWAYAM platform and dedicated broadcast channels are

very useful to offer online education. More extensive use of new technologies like Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning, etc., to make the support systems and management systems more self-reliant. The ‘social business model’ in operations will make the system financially self-reliant. The main focus of re-engineering is to make the open universities as ‘*Atmanirbhar* Universities’.

## **ASSESSMENT FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE**

Assessment and evaluation of performance are critical to quality assurance. The two forms of assessment, internal and external, reinforce each other contributing to institutional quality improvement and accountability. Open universities are in the process of going through the first cycle of assessment and accreditation, based on the criteria developed by National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC). The open universities should take seriously this activity as an opportunity to promote ‘self-insight’ and ‘quality assurance mindset’. Essentially, external assessment is a promotional activity of institutional development. The measurement of quality in terms of grade is to inform the institutions their levels of performance. This has always been a challenging task in terms of identifying right the areas and ways for measurement. But unfortunately high stakes are built into the grades of NAAC, with all issues associated with high stake activities. Some institutions are using NAAC grades for marketing their products, than for institutional development purposes. We hope the OUs to be an exception to this general trend in the system.

The UGC in recent years is emphasising the need for strengthening of internal quality assurance system in the form of every institution having a Centre for Internal Quality Assurance (CIQA). It is a welcome measure. The institutions have a primary responsibility for quality and all others have secondary promotional responsibilities. Every OU should have an effectively functional CIQA for continuous quality improvement. There should be institutional flexibility in the structures and functions of CIQA. ‘One size fits all’ may not be appropriate. The internal quality assurance systems should be examined for their inclusiveness, coherence, accountability, innovation, and effectiveness.

## **AGENDA FOR REIMAGINING**

It is time to develop strength to think differently and do bold things. As Socrates said, “the secret of change is to focus all of our energy not on fighting the old, but on building the new”. Building the new is always a challenging task at any point of history and more so in present times of neoliberal order where ‘I’ precedes over ‘We’, making a collective action a difficult task. In spite of difficulties we have to move forward with a Gandhian belief , “we have to be the change we wish to see”. In a continuity and change frame, the reimagination agenda should focus on systemic transformation from:

- More of the same programmes to the same groups of learners to more of different programmes to different groups of learners;



- Print mode learning resources to multimode/blended learning resources with appropriate pedagogies;
- Study centre/learner centre centric support to home based support services;
- Procedure oriented bureaucratic systems to results based technology-enabled management systems led by enlightened leadership; and
- Dependency model to ‘*Atmanirbhar Model*’.

We are aware that the above mentioned framework is not very new and most in the ODL system may be aware of it. We are repeating them in the pedagogic tradition of reinforcing by repetition and reconfirmation of our commitment by repetition. We are also aware that there is much diversity in institutional context of the 15 public OUs in India, requiring different responses to reimagination agenda. The OUs in India may be grouped into three categories of Stage-1: Beginning, Stage-2: Middle and Stage-3: Advanced, based on their levels of technological and academic preparedness to implement the transformational agenda for digital age operations. OUs need to relook into the great traditions of distance education as a technology-mediated teaching and learning that could embrace the new age internet-based online learning and provide new models of delivery adopting new approaches. A true distance education, in principle, is also a blended learning opportunity that depended on optional face-to-face contact between student and teacher in the study centre. Reimagination of OU needs understanding of the past as well as current technologies, with a passion for its foundational values and vision for the future. The works of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and other experts in the field of ODL and online learning may be used as benchmarks to assess the preparedness of open universities for digital age teaching-learning (Kanwar and Daniel, 2020).

## CONCLUSION

We are advocating reform not because the system became irrelevant but because of its unfulfilled greatness. Enlightened leadership with pragmatic vision, competent and motivated staff, adequate technology infrastructure, and flexible professional management are the four pillars of the OU system. In a systemic view, weakness in any one pillar effects the system as a whole. We have been observing different levels of deficit in these four pillars in many OUs, with existential threats to the system. Every OU may prepare its own ‘reform agenda’ reflecting its context. It is a time for change, as John Lewis said: “If not now, then when?” Action is Wisdom.

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