

Open School: Social Inclusion and Education for 21st Century

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Abstract:

Open school system has emerged as a practically viable alternative to meet the educational demand of a sizable number, owing to its unprecedented advantages over the formal education system. With the exploding use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), the open school system blended with the online educational system will attract a greater number of students, thereby shouldering burden of the formal education system. The present article deals with various facets of open school system, covering its basics, need and importance, advantages, and present scenario in Indian context. As seen from the UDISE+ reports it is speculated that, in the coming few years, the enrollment of students from primary to higher secondary level will cross 30 crores and thus, to cater to the educational need of such a gigantic number, strengthening of the Open School system with wider accessibility is anticipated.

Keywords: Open schooling, NIOS

Introduction:

Education, being an essence of Human Resource Development, plays a significant and remedial role in balancing the socio-economic framework of any country. India is well known for its diversity characterized by many religions, castes, cultures, and languages. For such country with notable diversity and huge population, education is one of the important tools to make “good citizens” and thereby achieve prosperity in every facet of life. The primary objective of education is to direct every individual to live his/her life in a useful and meaningful manner. Education prepares an individual for life, arms him/her physically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually to face the challenges with self-confidence and courage, taking the right decisions, and broadening their perspectives. Therefore, education should be consistent and regular in all aspects of society. In anticipation, timely efforts are made by the governments (state as well as central) for making education more affordable, reachable, and inclusive.

In this context, there has been continuous attempts made by the government (policy holders) introducing National Educational Policies and Curriculum Frameworks. In pursuance of National Policy on Education, in November 1989, the Ministry of Education, Government of India, established the **National Open School (NOS)**, an autonomous organization, now renamed as **National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS)** in 2002. The objective of NOS was to provide a number of vocational, life enrichment and community oriented courses, besides general and academic courses at secondary and senior secondary levels. It also offered elementary level courses through its Open Basic Education (OBE) programmes. The Right to Education was incorporated in Article 21 by the 86th constitution amendment in 2002. This was followed by the Right to Education Act in 2009, which guarantee free and compulsory education up to the age of 14, i.e. up to the std. VIII. The NOS recognized the need of inclusive education. Inclusive education

occurs when a student enrolls in a school and fulfills his/her educational needs according to age, gender, and socio-economic status. Furthermore, open schooling provides equal opportunity to students with diversity, making education more reachable, reasonable, and flexible. The main agenda of Inclusive Education Policy 2020 is to “strengthen the open schooling for most marginalized section specially girls, women, transgenders, disabled persons, and residing in remote/tribal areas”.

Concept of Open School

The term “**open schooling**” refers to as learning that is flexible in terms of schedule, teaching roles, location, ways of access, instructional methods, and other aspects of the learning process. The introduction of **Information and Communications Technology (ICT)** in education has notable impact on the open school system in India, enhancing its flexible approach to curriculum selection, pace, and location of study. With the aid of a diverse set of ICT tools, it is possible to create, communicate, disseminate, store, and manage the information. The distance mode allows the educational system to be more un-bound, accessible, and adaptable, granting students to study at home, at work, or anywhere else that is convenient for them without having to attend regular classes. Interestingly, the open schooling system helps students, who have failed their class 10th and/or 12th standard examinations, allowing them to retake the board examinations the same year.

The origin and introduction of the open school system in India is perhaps one of the most significant events in country’s educational pathway. The miles stones in the journey are CBSE-sponsored open school project introduced 1979, followed by establishment of an autonomous institute NOS in 1989. In 1986, the National Policy of Education (NPE) mentioned that “opportunities will be provided to the youth, housewives, agricultural and industrial workers and professionals to continue the education of their choice, at the pace suited to them. The NEP paved path for an independent open school with its separate syllabus and evaluation system. Accordingly, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) established the National Open School (NOS) in November 1989. Its primary motto is “*Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*,” which means “*Education to All*”. The establishment of NOS was done based on some mission and vision to extend supportive education at school level. Through a government resolution, the NOS was conferred with the authority to conduct and certify examinations for secondary and senior secondary levels.

In July 2002, the MHRD changed the name of NOS to National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS). Keeping in mind the NPE 1986 recommendations, the NIOS was made to be decisive in respect of (a) universalization of education, (b) greater equity and justice in society, and (c) evolution of a learning society. The NIOS provides opportunities for “what to learn”, “when to learn”, “where to learn” and “how to learn”, as illustrated in its 2015 prospectus. Within National Curriculum Framework (NCF-2005), the NIOS came up with an important policy document entitled “Vocational Education and Training”, with a focus on “knowledge acquisition and skills development through open and distance learning”. It was expected that this document will help in making a programme for implementation of vocational education programmes through open distance learning.

The NIOS is an open school system to take care of the necessitates mostly of the school dropouts with different age groups, cultural backgrounds, socio-economic divisions, etc. The NIOS programmes are made to popular among learners, physically and visually challenged and candidates from disadvantaged sections of the society. Students, who wish to avail the open schooling pattern, can register for secondary and senior secondary school courses through this board. However, owing to multicultural

and multilingual nature of aspirant students, NIOS alone cannot fulfil the needs and variances of all states/regions. Hence, assistance from the state boards of secondary and higher secondary is essential to accomplish the aims and objectives of the open schooling. The state boards are more effective in addressing the regional diversity, thereby providing similar services to NIOS.

The concept of an Open School at the secondary level was a big and bold departure from, and a considerable advance over, the concept of correspondence education. The aim was to liberate the system from its deep-seated rigidities and orthodoxy. The growing acceptability of NIOS certificate holders as potential job aspirants has added necessary credibility to this programme. Therefore, many students are getting into the open school system. With frequent transfer in jobs or migration of people from one state to another, creates so many problems for the family. This is also one of the reasons for wider acceptance and popularity of the open schools.

The open schools in India focuses on (i) eliminating the barriers towards learning, thereby making school education available to everyone, regardless of individual personality (ii) increasing the range and equality of access to education, (iii) confirming openness of the access to education, (iv) improving the teaching and learning experience, (v) warranting that curriculum is relevant to the demands of diverse communities, (vi) safeguarding the promotion of lifelong learning, as well as education and training.

Objectives of Open School:

1. To provide a non-formal, cost-effective, and accessible alternative to the formal secondary and senior secondary education.
2. To encourage flexible learning by giving students the freedom to choose where, when, what, and how they learn.
3. To democratize school education by allowing vast parts of the population, particularly disadvantaged groups such as those living in remote and rural areas, as well as working persons, who seek to gain or upgrade their knowledge and skills.
4. To provide an innovative high school level education system that is flexible and open in terms of learning methods and pace, course combinations, enrolment eligibility, age of entry, examination administration, and program operation.
5. To provide a second chance of education to those who have had to stop their formal education or who have been unable to enrol in conventional schools due to valid and rational factors.
6. To supplement and relieve pressure on the conventional school system.
7. To promote learning and encourage excellence in new fields of learning.
8. To enrich people's lives by providing ongoing and life-long education.

Need of Open School:

The open school board aims to deliver relevant, continuous, and developmental education to diverse groups of pupils through an Open Learning System at the secondary and senior secondary level, in response to the evaluated requirements of the people. As an alternative to the formal educational system, it contributes to universalization of education, more equality and justice in society, and evolution of a learning society. Despite making provision for *equalising education opportunities* through Article 45 of the Constitution, a notable quantum of students is deprived and unable to avail the existing educational facilities till date. There are several reasons for this undesirable and unhappy fact. One of the reasons is availability of limited institutional infrastructure in formal education system, which thereby constraints

the intake of students. It has been observed that, at primary as well as secondary school levels, the available intake number is much smaller than the number aspirants. Therefore, owing to limited institutional infrastructure and constrained intake number, the admissions in the formal education system are made on the basis of merit, leaving noticeable quantum of aspirants unadmitted. As a result, many of the aspirants are unable to enter into the formal system of education. Moreover, although getting admitted in schools, some of the students are unable to complete their secondary and higher secondary education.

There are several entangled socio-economic parameters responsible for keeping a noticeable number deprived of the formal education system. In addition, the special children, physically or mentally disabled, require entirely different infrastructure, not only physical buildings and playgrounds, but also the curriculum, teaching-learning aids and specially trained teachers. India is known to be agricultural nation. Despite rapidly growing urbanization, a sizable number lives in villages and country side areas. Some of these areas are geographically remote, the population is widely sparse and scattered. The schools in such areas are not within the reach of masses because of large distances. Thus, there are a number of hindrances faced by students to access the formal education. Many students drop-out of the formal system and have to discontinue their studies due to the lack of scholastic aptitude. Such drop-outs, who are later motivated to continue their education face various difficulties in resuming the formal system of education.

In addition to the aforesaid reasons responsible for keeping a sizable number out of formal education system (secondary and higher secondary levels), the working men/woman, despite their desire to continue higher education, drop-out from the formal education system. One of the reasons is overlapping of their work timings with the teaching schedule. Moreover, in some cases, the institutes, offering programme(s) of their interest, are not available nearby to their work places or residences. There is another category, wherein the persons look at education as a life time activity and are interested in updating their knowledge in a discipline or acquiring knowledge in new areas. These areas of new knowledge are either related to their hobbies or to the work they are doing in their jobs. Furthermore, some people realise that it is important to gain awareness of new techniques/technologies. Such educational needs of these persons demand accessibility to learning without making it binding on their part to join a course on a full-time basis at a formal school/college.

The plausible solution to all the above mentioned facts and/or causes, impeding their desire to complete the secondary, higher secondary, and/or college education, is making a provision of informal education system, which is nothing but an Open School or Open University.

Advantages of Open School:

Open schooling offers several unprecedented advantages. Some of the important and fundamental benefits are as follows:

- 1. Flexibility:** It is the foremost and discriminative factor making Open School system advantageous. An individual can choose the subjects of his/her choice from the list, can register for the course through various ways (online, through a study centre or a regional centre). The open school system provides its students some exceptional flexibilities which a regular school cannot. These are (a) flexibility of selecting a program or course irrespective of the age (b) flexibility of not attending classes, (c) flexibility of giving examinations when the student is ready, and (d) flexibility of time frame, which allows the student to complete the course at his/her pace. .

2. **Freedom to Learn:** The NIOS functions as per its motto; “Reach out and Reach all”. As stated above that there is no restriction on when to appear for the examination, the registered student decides it, based on his/her preparations.
3. **Examination Attempts:** In most of the formal education systems, the examinations are held twice in a year, students registered at NIOS or state open boards can appear for say nine examinations over a period of five years. Further, they are allowed to appear for the examination at any time during these five years and can avail the facility of credit accumulation too.
4. **Application and Significance:** It is misbelief that courses pursued at the open school may not get due recognition while going for higher studies. There is no discrimination between the higher secondary school certificates earned from formal and open school boards. Surprisingly, many distinguished institutes of higher education (like IITs, IISc, or top most central and state universities) have given admissions to open school alumni.
5. **Transfer of Credits:** Students are allowed to transfer up to two subjects passed from national/international/state boards/state open schools that have tied up with the NIOS.
6. **Quality Education:** The NIOS along with open school state boards is striving hard to maintain the quality of education thereby eradicating the doubt of inferiority. From its inception, NIOS has taken utmost care in quality assurance.
7. **Special Facilities for the differently abled:** The NIOS and allied open school boards of states take care of the “special students” (physically or mentally disabled) and offer various conveniences like an additional hour to visually impaired or differently abled persons, relaxations for candidates suffering from sudden illness/accident, etc. These concessions are available for theory examination only, and not for the practical tests.

Present Scenario:

From the inception of NIOS, the central government in association with various state governments has expended the network of open school system to justify the underlined objectives. At present, as seen from the profile and annual reports of NIOS, it has 23 Regional Centers and 03 sub centers spanning over entire country. The infrastructure is further expanded by network of 7780 accredited study centers (including 1762 vocational institutes and 1462 agencies). In addition, NIOS has 29 overseas study centers, mostly in middle East Asian countries. The major activity of NIOS is related to secondary and higher secondary school boards. In addition, it offers Vocational and Skill Development Programmes comprised of certificate courses, diploma courses, stand alone certificate courses, and integrated academic and vocational (secondary and higher secondary level). Furthermore, to extend its outreach to primary students, Open Basic Education (OBE) programmes have been initiated at different levels, viz, Level A (Class III), Level B (Class V), Level C (Class VIII). To impart quality school education, it has been observed that many un-aided/private schools do not have 100 % ‘trained’ teachers. In this regard, NIOS has taken initiative by launching Teacher Education Programme, which at present covers D. El. Ed, Early Childhood Care and Education, and Yoga Teachers Training. The Central Government has been kind enough to provide sufficient financial support to NIOS and allied institutes of open school system. From the annual reports of NIOS, it is revealed that the financial budget of NIOS, which was 207,44,09,943 in 2010, was increased to 386,70,01,909 in 2015, and in the FY 20-21, it was 2610,23,60,316, implying ten-fold increase in past ten years.

Department of School Education and Literacy, Ministry of Education, Government of India, has initiated Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+), as a largest Management Information Systems, which covers more than 14.89 lakhs of schools, 95 lakhs of teachers and 26.5 crores of children. From the UDISE+ report of 2021-2022, the total enrolment in 2021-22 from primary to higher secondary levels of school education was a little over 25.57 Crore (Boys ~13.28 Crore, and Girls ~ 12.28 Crore), indicating an increase by more than 19 lakhs over 2020-21. Total enrolment of all schools in the UDISE+ system from pre-primary to higher secondary, have crossed 26.52 Crore in 2021-22. At the levels of primary, secondary and higher secondary, school enrolment has increased, indicating improvement in ability of the system to retain more and more children in school education.

Conclusion:

The Right to Education Act (RTE) ensures free, accessible, and quality school education to every Indian child up to age of 14. Based on the UDISE+ reports, it is speculated that the total enrolment from primary to higher secondary level will cross 30 crores in coming few years. It is very challenging for the present infrastructure to cater the educational need of such gigantic number of students. In this regard, the open school system, via NIOS and allied State Regional Centers can play a vital role in shouldering the burden of formal education system (i.e. teaching via regular class rooms necessitating compulsory attendance of students). Needless to state that, the open school system owing to its characteristics advantages, when blended with the on-line teaching (virtual class room teaching using ICT tools, like SWAYAM) will bring miraculous outcomes in school education in the coming years.

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