



## Extending Open Distance Learning into Rural North-Eastern India

Sunil KUMAR, Neelam CHAUDHARY, & Girija SHANKAR  
Indira Gandhi National Open University, India  
[sunilk@ignou.ac.in](mailto:sunilk@ignou.ac.in)

### ABSTRACT :

The North East Region of India has been suffering from insurgency, and political and social isolation from the rest of the country. It is one of the most backward areas of the country. This paper describes the experiences of Indira Gandhi National Open University in extending its services into the North East Region. The issues raised in this paper have international significance particularly for developing countries as they grapple with similar challenges and various kinds of problems as prevailing in the North East Region.

### 1. INTRODUCTION :

It is a well-known fact that poverty acts an impediment for the poor to manage their day-to-day needs. They cannot afford to make good investment in educating their children, and this leads to an unproductive class of youth. Basic education can play a crucial role in bringing back the unproductive class of the society into the main stream of development. Mahakavi Subramania Bharathi, an eminent poet of Tamil language, stressed in one of his poems that nutrition and education are like two legs of a human being. You need both to lead an active and productive life (M.S. Swami Nathan Research Foundation, 2007). Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen (2000) pointed out in his book 'Development as Freedom' that Japan was the first example of a country that built social opportunities and economic growth on the foundation of universal basic education. This revolution took place in the mid-nineteenth century when Japan was a poor country. The World Bank (undated, c2005) report of the evaluation of primary education also stresses the need for primary education to promote economic growth in a country. The

1990 world conference on 'Education for All' held in Jomtein, Thailand, put the concept of 'Education for All' on the world's agenda. Governments of developing countries understand the role of basic education in the overall development of their society. They have been investing a large part of their GDP on the expansion of basic education. Still, achievements are very low. Open and distance learning (ODL) systems offer a viable and economical solution to impart basic education to the poor.

Continuing and adult education programmes are launched with great enthusiasm by institutions, but their initiatives are not taken seriously by governments (Dighe, 2000) providing basic and lifelong education to adults (IDEA, 2000). The strength of an ODL system in continuing and lifelong education is underestimated by the government. The uses of open and distance learning for basic education in developing countries is an under-researched and under-reported area. (Perraton, 1997) This is one of the main reasons for the continued underestimation of the capabilities of the ODL systems in many under-developed poor regions.

A large number of organisations and educational institutions are involved in dissemination of knowledge and imparting skills training at the basic education level but their experiences and contributions are not properly communicated or shared with others, who are working for similar purposes. A rapid survey of research literature on education indicates that a large segment of research work in the education discipline is about effectiveness and impact of programmes offered through ODL systems. The research works usually focus on post-implementation phases of the programmes. The other planning and implementation phases of the educational programmes are neglected research areas. This scenario leads to creation of islands of knowledge. These islands of knowledge need to be bridged to share knowledge and resources so that the education planners and administrators will get lessons from others' experiences and minimise unnecessary repetition of works. There is no need to reinvent wheel.

This paper explains the planning, development and implementation phases of formal and non-formal programmes, offered by Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), in the North-East Region of India. The paper reflects institution-based policies, i.e. policies and activities carried out by IGNOU for developing and offering programmes. It explains experiences of IGNOU in expanding its reach in the NE region of India by tracking opportunities and challenges faced during the expansion. This study is not limited to illustration of activities of the university but also reports the demography, social, economical and educational environment of the NE region to explain the contextual reality in the education sector in the North East Region. This provides guidance to various individuals and organisations concerned with bridging the gap between various segments of the society. This paper suggests strategies for offering educational or vocational trainings programmes to help educational administrators, NGOs and governments to identify and resolve challenges in similar kinds of contextual environment.

## 2. DEMOGRAPHY OF THE NORTH EAST REGION OF INDIA :

India is the world's second most populous country and is expected to be the most populous by 2030. About 70% of the population of the country resides in rural areas. Thus the economy of the country is rural based. India has been facing problems of imbalanced patterns of development. The distribution of wealth is uneven among urban-rural, male-female, various social classes, and particularly between well-developed and deprived areas. This imbalance has worsened under the open market economy since 1980. Since then, the wealthier have become wealthier, and the poorer have become poorer. These economic imbalances across different segments of society impede the social and economical growth of any country. The imbalance across the regions was responsible for raising of the regional demands for autonomy and independent separate statehood. Such imbalance is a bad indicator for the future of any country. A country can have prosperous future only when all segments of the society join the development and are at an equal wavelength on the development scale. Universal basic education, continuing and extension education can all help to diminish these imbalances between these various segments of society.

It is important to know the demography, socio-economic features and governing challenges of the north-eastern region to understand its educational needs and finding modalities to meet these needs. The North East Region of India is the eastern-most region of the country consisting of the contiguous seven sister states and the State of Sikkim. The seven states are Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura. Sikkim became an Indian protectorate in 1947 and a full state in 1975. The total area of the region is about 2,55,168 sq. km. Territory wise this region is very sensitive as it shares international borders with China, Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh. Moreover, these states share only a 21-km common border with the rest of India. Its natural geography

coupled with the unstable border environment is the major constraint against the growth of this region. In the past, natives of China and Myanmar have settled in the NE region and influenced the local culture. Thus the NE region is culturally, socially and politically isolated from the rest of the country. The NE region has not taken an active role in the growth of India due to social and geographical isolation. This region has been particularly lagging behind the rest of the country in terms of development.

The North East Region has a unique culture, social structure, scenic beauty and handicraft. The region has high concentrations of tribal populations, such as of Scheduled Tribe (ST) and Scheduled Caste (SC) populations. The populations of these in each state are given in TABLE 1.

NE region is very high compared to the national average. The SC population density in Tripura is slightly above the national level. The population census data for 2001 is shown in TABLE 2, and indicate that a large segment of young population is still to be covered with higher education opportunities.

A large segment of population in the north east region lives below poverty line. The other major constrains in the development of the North-East region are unemployment, HIV-AIDS, drug addiction, lack of infrastructure, low literacy etc. (Sudhir & Hajarimayum, 2007). The governance of the region is severely affected by extremist groups. The central and state governments have a weakened role in governing the states of the North East Region. This weak administration is a

TABLE 1 : Populations of Scheduled Tribe and Scheduled Caste by State

State	Total Population	Scheduled Tribe (ST) Population (%)	Scheduled Caste (SC) Population (%)
Arunachal Pradesh	1,091,117	705,158 (64.2)	6,188 (0.6)
Assam	26,638,407	3,308,570 (12.4)	1,825,949 (6.9)
Manipur	2,388,634	741,141 (34.2)	60,037 (2.8)
Meghalaya	2,306,069	1,992,862 (85.9)	11,139 (0.5)
Mizoram	891,058	839,310 (94.5)	272 (0.0)
Nagaland	1,988,636	1,774,026 (89.1)	-
Sikkim	540,493	111,405 (20.6)	27,165 (5.0)
Tripura	3,191,168	993,426 (31.1)	555,724 (17.4)
Total NE	39,035,582	10,465,898 (26.8)	2,486,474 (6.37)
Total India	1,028,610,328	84,326,240 (8.2)	166,635,700 (16.2)

www.censusindia.net

The states of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland have high densities of these native tribes. Each tribe has its own values, culture, languages, and lifestyle. The three states of Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland have high concentrations of ST population. The density of ST populations in these states is more than 80%. The ST population in the

major hurdle in implementing schemes for the development of poor and backward community. Thus the political and public administrative environment in the region is not conducive for educational and economic development. It is a challenging job for the government to bring back these states into mainstream development and growth in harmony with the rest of the country.

TABLE 2 : Population 17~23 Years Old and Enrolment in Higher Education

State	Total Population	Population 17~23 years old	Enrolled in Higher Education	Population 17~23 years old left out
Arunanchal Pradesh	1,091,117	120,117	6,745	113,372
Assam	26,638,407	3,371,034	214,342	3,156,692
Manipur	2,388,634	298,201	36,732	261,469
Meghalaya	2,306,069	251,562	17,738	233,824
Mizoram	891,058	11,011	6,660	4,351
Nagaland	1,988,636	231,340	13,179	218,161
Sikkim	540,493	65,745	6,596	59,149
Tripura	3,191,168	401,061	22,447	378,614

www.censusindia.net, and MHRD Annual Report 2002-2003

The climate of the region is very supportive for agriculture. Agriculture is the mainstay of the people. The age-old practice of jhum cultivation is carried out by the farmers. Post-harvesting and food-processing-based industry can play significant roles in the economic development of this region. The majority of the geographical areas in the NE region of India are hilly terrains which act like the socio-economic backbone. A large portion of the non-hilly terrain is covered by reserved forest area. Farmers and local people are not allowed to use reserved forest resources for their livelihood. The farmers of these states are left with negligible lands for farming. The population of landless agricultural workers is very high in this region. The reserved forests are good sources for herbal plants. People from the nearby areas have been illegally uprooting herbal plants to extract medicine. As a result, commonly used herbal plants have now become rare and endangered. There is a need to cultivate herbal plants to conserve the forest.

The World Bank (2007) has reported on malnutrition among children in India that people in the North-East region have been suffering from malnutrition problems despite this area being full of greenery and with lots of good food resources full of nutrition. A better awareness about food

preservation and food processing could not only help educate them about the significance and means to get high nutrient foods but also provide opportunities for new entrepreneurship in the post-harvesting sector.

The economy of the North East Region is centered around rural activities. Therefore, it is important to improve the rural economy through enhancing rural productivity throughout the North East Region. The rural population has been facing deep distress due to rapidly changing social factors, rural economy, poor weather, and poor marketing environment. Rural population needs to be educated and appropriate skills need to be developed to make them more robust against changing scenarios and so contribute to sustainable development. There are mines and mine-based industries in the region, and potential scope for bamboo crafts and ready-made garments made of specially designed local handloom cloth. Thus the economy of this region depends on agro-based industries, mines, handicraft, bamboo, and herbal plants. The government vision statements for the North East region also state that the region is immensely rich in natural resources. There is a need to convert these rich resources into material prosperity to reap and share the benefits (Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research, 2007).

The government and educational institutions understand the educational needs of the region. Accordingly, they have developed training / vocational programmes alone with formal / professional educational programmes based on industrial labor relations, on labor social welfare, and on the development of agro-based industries. These programmes are having only a limited impact because very few higher education institutions are established in this region. These institutions are mainly established in the central urban or well-off areas. The uneven distribution of opportunities for higher education in the region further widens the gap between the well-off and the backward areas. The Government of India has found viable solutions in the form of ODL system to root out such uneven distribution of higher education opportunities.

The North East Region needs peace, development, and connectivity. They may not be treated as three isolated entities. They are integrated to one another. The Government of India has given special recognition for this region to focus on social and economical development. After independence, the government has taken a number of measures to strengthen the North East Region of the country. The North-Eastern Council was constituted in 1972 to expedite the development in the region. Despite an unusual abundance of funds and commitments from the government for the growth this region, the appropriate development could not take place. So the socio-economic status of this region has continued to worsen day-by-day despite the measures taken by the government.

In the past two decades, insurgency activities have subsided to a great extent. Most of the insurgent groups in the region have entered into peace agreements with the Government of India. Now the government has shifted its focus from insurgency to other social and economic problems prevailing in the region.

Education should be directly related to life, society and the work scenario of the learners. Now, state-funded conventional universities in India have lost their glory as the programmes offered by them are neither

job-oriented nor life-oriented (Neelakantan, 2005). Conventional universities have been unable to change their curricula of their programmes flexibly to make them useful for the common man due to lack in funds, untrained teachers, intervention of teacher unions and students unions, and so on. The constraints prevailing in conventional university are not so strong, however, in the open and distance learning (ODL) system. The approaches used under the ODL system for the development and implementation of skills-based training programmes are more diversified than those used in the conventional mode. The ODL system is capable of delivering programmes tailored to the specific needs and learning styles of the target groups. Thus the ODL system is a viable alternate for higher education.

### 3. OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING SYSTEMS :

The demographic analysis of enrolment in higher education indicates that adults from lower socio-economic classes like to participate in job-related and basic-skills-imparting programmes, whereas those from higher social classes would seek education to satisfy achievement needs and self-realization needs (Miller, 1967) Thus continuing and adult education programmes are more popular among lower socio-economic classes of society. Open and distance learning (ODL) systems are particularly well-suited to job-related and basic-skills training, so ODL is ideal as well as an economical mode for imparting quality basic education and vocational training on a large scale.

The ODL system has weakened the insidious links between quality and exclusivity. Open universities have shown that more does not mean poor quality. The economies of scale of the open universities have generated qualities of scale (Daniel, 2002)

Rumble (1986) categorized open learning models into three broad categories on the basis of their social orientation as follows ;-

- (a) an institution-centered educational model,
- (b) a person-centered educational

model, and (c) a society-based educational model. The majority of open learning institutions in India fall under (a) the institution-centered model. This model is very similar to conventional systems, where prime attention is given to improve the effectiveness of the institution. The society-based educational model is based on social actions where adult learners act as a changing agent who assist community groups to identify problems and courses of action. The society-based model is the most suitable model for the delivery of continuing and extension education programmes. A similar kind of education model was recommended by Mahatma Gandhi in the late thirties for lifelong learning. He endorsed the role of lifelong learning in the development of the nation.

The Indian Government could not adopt the society-based education model as they did not have any reliable means to take education out of the boundaries of the institution. The existing institutions used radio, television and printed materials to take education across the boundaries but these modes have limited potential due to inadequate interactivity capabilities. The applications of information and computer technology (ICT), however, bring interactivity and diminish the barriers prevailing between society and the educational institutions. The applications of ICT make a way for institutions to adopt the society-based educational model. IGNOU has been using ICT-based innovations to adopt the society-based education model to offer continuing and extension education programmes. The competitive job market demands continuous improvement in the knowledge and skills of employees. Employees need lifelong learning opportunities, which can be provided with the help of the ODL system without dislocating people from their houses and workplaces.

The offering of vocational programmes through an ODL system is a challenging job as the system is based on naive sociology practices, which ignore the role of social interaction, apprenticeship and technical skills in the generation of knowledge. ICT innovations have brought major changes in

the delivery of vocational programmes through overcoming the problems of isolation and poor delivery of the apprenticeship and technical skills component. Now vocational and training programmes delivered through an ODL system are equally effective as programmes offered through the conventional mode.

The ODL system has proved to be an effective tool to impart education for disadvantage groups, to the neo-literate class of society, to people living in remote or rural areas, and to sections of society which could not avail themselves of conventional education. The ODL system succeeded through building a wide network of students support services and flexible admission criteria.

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) has also developed and has been offering five programmes with the objective to reduce rural poverty in Cameroon, India, Kenya, Nigeria, and the Solomon Islands, under the Poverty Reduction Outcomes through Education Innovations and Networks project (COL-PROTEIN). These programmes are being offered in collaboration with local educational institutions and NGOs. The COL developed another community-based distance learning programme for fisherman in Andhra Pradesh, India. The objective of the programme is to train fisherman in post-harvesting-based techniques.

#### 4. PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION OF PROGRAMMES AT IGNOU :

Indira Gandhi National Open University was established in 1985, with national jurisdiction, to offer education through the ODL system. One of the prime mandates assigned to IGNOU is to meet the educational needs of disadvantaged sections of society and provide lifelong learning opportunities. IGNOU has been offering formal as well as continuing and extension education programmes in the NE region. The growth in enrolment in the various programmes by IGNOU into the North East Region of the country in the last six years is given in TABLE 3.

TABLE 3 : Enrolment in the NE Region

Year	Enrolment
2001	8,196
2002	10,141
2003	11,240
2004	13,534
2005	17,594
2006	22,200

The enrolment in IGNOU's programmes in the North East Region has increased by 140% year-on-year during the past five years, from 8,196 to 22,200 students (TABLE 3). The absolute numbers of community participants in the programmes are still relatively small, but the growth rate in enrolment indicates the high acceptability of IGNOU's programmes in this region. The quantitative impact of IGNOU in the region may be minute but its gradual recognition has now paved a way for the future for an ODL-based learning environment in the region.

The Honorable Prime minister of India made a statement at Guwahati on 27<sup>th</sup> October 1996 that a new initiative would be announced for the industrial development of the North East Region. Consequently, the Government of India sanctioned and funded a number of projects for the development of the region to bring back this region into mainstream development. The Ministry of Human Resource and Development (MHRD) sanctioned a project 'Educational Development of the North-East and Sikkim' to IGNOU in 2000. The Ministry sanctioned INR 8 billions (about 1.8 million US\$) for this project. The project is funded from the Non-lapsable Central Pool of Resources (NLCPR) created by the Planning Commission, India. The objectives of the project include ;

- Creation of educational opportunities through the ODL system in the North East Region ;
- Expansion of IGNOU's student support network to cover the remote and far off

places of the North East Region by establishing new Regional Centres and Study Centres ;

- Offer short-term vocational and entrepreneurship development programmes in collaboration with local bodies and NGOs to increase the socio-economical status of the region by providing new job opportunities, improving skills, self-employment and entrepreneurship avenues ;
- Establishment of a network of multi-purpose community work centres in the North East Region. These work centres will act as knowledge resource centres and provide training opportunities ; and
- Use ICT to reach out to the unreached.

The Educational Development of the North-East and Sikkim Project is the first major attempt by IGNOU to meet the formal and informal educational needs of the North East Region of the country. The enrolment trends in TABLE 3 indicate the impact of the project.

The university has proposed INR 140 billion (about 31.1 million US\$) as planned outlay for the development of the North East Region under its Eleventh Plan (2007-11). It is about 10% of the total planned outlay of the university. The budget outlay for the financial year 2007-2008 is INR 16.0 billion (about 3.6 million US\$). The allocation pattern of funds to the NE region indicates the university's commitments for the development of the region.

IGNOU has a long experience in the implementation of vocational, continuing and extension education programmes through the ODL system. The University established the Centre for Extension Education (CEE) in 1996 to focus on extension and continuing education activities. In 1998, IGNOU constituted a Special Task Force on disadvantage groups to understand their problems and to set up modalities to bring them back into the mainstream of development.

The Special Task Force recommended the following steps to increase the participation of the disadvantaged community in the programmes organized by IGNOU especially for them.

- Relaxation in the eligibility criterion for admission ;
- Subsidized fee for disadvantaged groups ;
- Financial assistance and scholarships for economically weaker students. Such financial assistance may be arranged with the support of central or state governments ;
- Offer vocational programmes to provide new job opportunities, improve skills and create an entrepreneurship environment ;
- Establish more study centres in areas which are densely populated by disadvantaged sections of society. NGO and local bodies may be involved in providing student support services in remote areas, where opening of new study centres is not economically viable due to low enrolments ; and
- Seminars, conferences and brain-storming sessions should be conducted on a regular basis to understand the educational needs of the disadvantaged groups.

The productivity of the existing manpower in the NE region is limited : there is an immense need for the systematic development of skills and techniques of the local workers. IGNOU has been offering short-term training programmes to impart skills for making a livelihood in the NE region. These programmes are also offered within the project.

Research indicates that continuing education programmes are effective only when learning experiences gained during the programme are relevant to the lives of learners. The university has been offering special programmes under the North East project, to impart skills training in areas which are closely related to the lives and work of the students. Hands-on training and field visits are the essential components of these programmes to understand the actual uses of theories explained in the courses.

There are very few media persons and few newspapers in the regional languages. The quality of regional newspapers is very poor. Issues related to national interests and development are not effectively covered by

the regional newspapers. If there had been media persons in this region, things would have been quite different by now (Sandham, 2007). The university discovered the need to train local youths in journalism and media disciplines. The university has therefore established multimedia training centres under the North-East project for capacity building in multimedia development. Youths, who are aspirant for careers in media, are trained in multimedia production. In the first phase, newly trained producers have produced 19 films to raise awareness about local concerns. The university has proposed to establish at least one multimedia training centre in each state of the NE region.

There is direct correlation between economical status and health awareness. Poor people have lesser concerned about health. The WHO reports also stated that the NE region has been suffering from the problems of malnutrition. A Certificate Programme in Food and Nutrition (CFN) is being offered by the university. It is among general awareness programmes intended to improve awareness about the nutrition values of food. This programme is offered in regional languages along with English and Hindi. An awareness programme about the Panchayati Raj is being offered by the university. This programme is meant to train heads of villages in administrative issues and explain to them the functioning of various government agencies and how to interact with these agencies.

The states governments realized the importance of ICT in day-to-day life. All blocks (the smallest administrative unit in India) are now connected within a computer network managed by the National Informatics Centre (NIC), Government of India. Information relevant to day-to-day life is made available through this network. A new computer-based curriculum is introduced at the school level. The computer-based curriculum is kept as an elective component of programmes due to the poor infrastructure and untrained teaching staff. Research indicates that school teachers and students have expressed enormous interests in computer applications but their competency is limited. They do not

know how to adapt and use ICT in their day-to-day life. IGNOU has been organizing seminars, workshops and training programmes for in-service teachers to train them in teaching ICT-based education. The Computer Literacy Programme (CLP) was launched in 2002 in the North East Region in collaboration with the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology through selected study centres of IGNOU and 217 Community Information Centres (CIC) in the region. CIC are established by the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology. The duration of the CLP programme is of one month. The objective of the programme is to provide training in basic computing skills. The curriculum of the programme covers the basics of computer use and applications (Windows and MS-Office). To date, the University has trained about 8000 students (as of March 2007) in basic computing skills through this new computer literacy programme.

IGNOU is also involved in multi-level training programmes where IGNOU is not involved in direct training or educating the target group but provides training to trainers and instructors. These trainers further train people at large scale. IGNOU has been playing significant roles in improving the quality of education by organizing training programmes to upgrade teaching skills for in-service teachers working at schools and at the university level. The University has developed a certificate programme for in-service teachers of primary schools. This programme is exclusively offered in the North-East region project. The programme is of six months' duration. The block resource centres and District Institutes of Educational Training (DIET) act as the study centres for this programme. This programme has been translated into regional languages (Assamese, Khasi, Garo and Bengali) to improve its accessibility.

The University has organized training programmes in watershed management, mushroom cultivation, food processing, handicrafts, computer hardware & maintenance, floriculture, food safety and nutrition value, and others, within the above

North-East region project. These vocational programmes are each offered in the regional languages including Assamese, Khari, Gora and Bengali. These programmes are of short duration. The numbers of participants are kept low to pay attention to each individual learner. Hands-on training is the major component in each of all these vocational programmes.

The road transport network in the North-East region is very poor. Youths from remote areas fail to join conventional programmes due to poor road connectivity. The ODL system can meet education needs of such people by forming self-help peer groups in each village itself. A number of institutions have successfully used the concept of self-peer group for imparting education. IGNOU has introduced similar concepts in the form of Distance Learning Facilitators (DLF) in areas where enrolment was extremely low (below 10). The university appointed a person as DLF to provide counseling and other support services as usually provided by a study centre.

The University has dedicated educational TV and radio channels named as Gyan Darshan and Gyan Vaani respectively. The interactive radio counseling sessions are also arranged on a weekly basis.

A memorandum of understanding (MOU) has been signed between IGNOU and the Director General, The Assam Rifles Regiment, to provide further education opportunities to army personnel of the Assam Rifles. One Regional Centre and more than thirty study centres have been established to provide support services for the army personnel of the Assam Rifles, serving in the NE region.

The University has been continuously assessing the quality and usefulness of its programmes on the basis of feedback received from students. The University has discovered that learners found the various vocational programmes offered to be relevant to their day-to-day lives and their professions. They were got easily associated in various activities of the programmes. These programmes are developed and offered in close collaboration with the state governments, educational institutions, NGO

groups and others. The outside agencies have been providing academic, administrative, logistic and financial support. The major challenges faced by the IGNOU in offering these programmes in the North East Region are discovered through the continuous monitoring of the situation to include the following ;

- Non-availability of subject experts in professional and vocation-based disciplines, who can develop or translate instructional materials into regional languages ;
- The expansion of the ODL programme depends on the strength of the student support network. Very few institutions in the NE region have adequate infrastructure to function as a study centre. Poor infrastructure hinders adequate student support services. Thus creation of a strong student support network needs heavy investment in the establishment of infrastructure ;
- Shortage of academic staff trained in ODL practices at regional centres and study centres to provide effective counseling support ;
- Shortage of administrative staff at regional centres and study centres to carry out administrative activities ;
- Weak linkages among various agencies working for similar causes in the same geographical areas, which leads to wastage in resources and poor output ;
- The university has implemented uniform curricula across the country. Only two certificate programmes - one in food and nutrition and the other in training teachers at the primary level - are available in regional languages. Other programmes are offered in English and Hindi only. Moreover, the curricula of most of IGNOU's formal programmes have less relevance in these local contexts ;
- Diversity of cultures, languages, needs and challenges in the region make it impossible to serve all the needs of all the segments of the society ; and
- Governance in the NE region continues to be severely affected by underground outfits and insurgency.

The headquarters of the North East project is located at the main IGNOU campus in New Delhi, which is about 1800 km from the nearest state of the North East region. The flight time to the nearest capital of the north-eastern states from Delhi is 2:30 hours. The applications of ICT, telephone, and facsimile make it convenient to monitor and facilitate various activities of the project from Delhi. The ICT applications diminish the physical distance. The involvement of local bodies in the implementation of various activities of the project also help in building close control.

##### 5. CAPACITY BUILDING IN THE NORTH EAST REGION :

The first distance learning institution in the North East Region was established in the year 1986 by the North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU), a conventional university from Assam. It was followed by the establishment of a Regional Centre of IGNOU at Shillong, the state capital city of Meghalaya, in 1987. The establishment of a second regional centre took nine years. It was established at Guwahati, the state capital city of Assam, in 1996. The expansion of IGNOU's network in the North-East region has been slow prior to the implementation of the North-East project. The North-East project has acted as a catalyst in the expansion of IGNOU's network in the North East Region. Krishna Kant Handic State Open University is the first open university of the NE region, established in Assam in February 2007.

At present, IGNOU has one regional centre in each of the states of the North East Region. There are now regional centres in the state capitals of six states, which were established since 2001 under the project. The student support network in this North East Region now consists of 230 study centres including 30 learner support centres for the armed-forced personnel of the Assam Rifles Regiment, under the tie-up agreed by IGNOU and the Assam Rifles for providing education to in-service army personnel. Of the total 230 study centres, 80 are now equipped with ICT infrastructure.

Every regional centre has a state-of-the-art computer laboratory to provide computer practical opportunities to students. These centres are called Tele-Learning Centres (TLCs). Each TLC is equipped with 20~30 computers with internet connectivity. All districts of the North East Region up to block level are well connected through a computer network managed by the National Information Centre (NIC), an autonomous body of the Government of India. There are now four universities offering ODL programmes in the North East Region, including Gauhati, Dibrugarh, North Eastern Hill, and Tripura University (TABLE 4). The number of programmes is still fairly limited.

A total of 88 study centres have down-linking facilities. In the first phase of expansion of the Edusat network, the University has identified 29 study centres in the NE region for establishing an Edusat terminal. The Edusat is an education satellite owned by the Government of India. In the second phase of the expansion of the Edusat network, 50 more sites will be identified for building Edusat terminals. All regional centres in the NE region are equipped with analogue down-link facility to receive signals from the Edusat satellite. The University is planning to upgrade these down-linking facilities to digital at each regional centre. These stations not only broadcast national educational programmes

TABLE 4 : 2004 Status of University ODL Systems in the North East Region

State	Institution	year established	Number of Programmes	Total Enrolment
Arunanchal Pradesh	---			
Assam	Gauhati U. Dibrugarh U.	1998 1965	7 7	1,023 1,600
Manipur	---			
Meghalaya	North Eastern Hill U.	1987	2	9
Mizoram	---			
Nagaland	---			
Sikkim	---			
Tripura	Tripura U.	1998	4	714

The Government of India agreed to establish a network of FM radio stations for delivering education across the country. The FM radio stations network is called Gyan Vani. It was decided that in the first phase of expansion, one FM radio station would be established in the capital of each state of the North East Region. IGNOU has been acting as a nodal agency for establishing and running the Gyan Vani radio stations. To date, two radio stations have been established – one each at Guwahati and Shillong in the NE region under the Gyan Vaani project, since 2005. Radio stations in the other six states will be established soon.

but also distribute locally-made awareness programmes about local concerns.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS :

Intellectual resources act as capital under the new open market economy which encourages ICT-based customer support-related services and marginalized agricultural-based economy. There is much need in India for expediting the transition from the agricultural-based economy to a non-agricultural-based economy, where the people have good earning skills and jobs.

The government has introduced various education-imparting projects in low-literacy districts. The literacy level is not the sufficient criterion to judge the extent of backwardness of any area as the living standards of people living in the higher-literacy areas is not on par with those standards in the lower-literacy areas. The backward areas are more clearly identified with the help of an Education Development Index or Human Development Index. These indexes are developed by the Planning Commission of India. The Educational Development Index is calculated on the basis of four parameters :- (a) literacy achievement, (b) equity and accessibility of primary education, (c) investment in education, and (d) the availability of educational facilities. All four parameters are given equal weighting.

The following parameters may also be considered along with above parameters, to decide the backwardness of any region. These parameters are indirectly related with the educational development level :- access to ICT, the transport and road network, the birth rate and infant mortality, the average life expectancy, general nutritional status, and the penetration level of immunization.

Education is the necessary condition for development but not a sufficient condition. A numbers of states with low-literacy rates have high economic status. Kerala State stands first in educational achievement but the overall economic status of the state is low and inconsistent with its educational achievements. Social development depends upon a number of factors apart from education. There is a need to build the overall growth of the NE region. The state government should create a conducive environment for the development and growth of education as a first step.

All the states in the North East Region are broadly facing similar kinds of problems. An analysis of their problems in respect of the contextual environment at a micro level would reveal that every state has its unique problem scenario. Thus the approach of one-size-fits-all is not feasible to resolve the problems of the North East Region. Not only each state but within each state every community within a state should

be examined separately, and only then accordingly solutions should be worked out keeping in mind the local specific socio-economic environment, problems, constraints and opportunities.

Collaboration should be encouraged among the available educational institutions, NGO groups, and the social welfare authorities and groups, to expedite the expansion of education. A consortium should be established to create an effective cooperative environment involving all the various agencies of the North East Region. IGNOU as the apex body in the ODL system in India has taken the initiative in this direction by establishing an Inter-University Consortium in the North East Region to support the development and promotion of the ICT-based education.

Now, ICT applications are an integral part of day-to-day lifestyles and lifelong learning. The ICT-based tools are effective in bringing democratization in quality education. They can overcome problems arising due to a scarcity in qualified teachers. Educational institutions should explore new ways to use ICT applications in their teaching and learning processes. Institutions should adopt a blended learning model. Teachers and students should be encouraged and rewarded for using ICT in the teaching and learning processes. The states governments and educational institutions should draft long terms policies for the implementation of blended learning. The state government should build an ICT infrastructure for community use. The creation of an ICT network needs heavy investment. The states governments could approach various agencies for funding the development of ICT infrastructure.

The training programmes for post-harvesting productions for tea plantations, bamboo, silk, floriculture, dairy farming, watershed management, mushroom cultivation, food processing, handicrafts, computer hardware and maintenance, floriculture, food safety and nutritional science all have good prospects in the North East Region. However, this region has been facing the severe problems of drug abuse and HIV-AIDS. These problems are major threats for the economic development of the

region as the younger generations are severely affected by these problems. There is a chronic need to incorporate curricular content based on social values and sex education as common components into all the programmes at least to some extent.

The continuing education programmes are joined by youths from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, and with various education and work experiences. The adult learners bring different levels of motivation. The implementation of common and rigid curricula cannot serve the purposes of all the participants. Programme components which are perceived to be useful and necessary by the target groups themselves should be incorporated. Flexible curricula and flexible delivery modes are more effective in serving the needs of such heterogeneous population. However, as a result, the development, implementation and monitoring of such programmes have all become more complex and expensive with these increases in the flexibility of the programmes. Some equilibrium ought to be created among flexibility, complexity, and the costs of the programmes. The eligibility criteria for admission in vocational programmes should be made more flexible so that people with different backgrounds and qualifications join the programmes.

The literature indicates that the learning needs of female students are different from that of male students. Each group uses different approaches to achieve their learning objectives. Female students are reported to prefer shared learning rather than independent learning. Female students often lack self-confidence and have low self-esteem in starting or returning to study (Dighe, 2000). Independence, self-paced learning, high self-esteem, and intrinsic motivations are all prominent features needed in any student to be successful in the ODL system. Females and neo-literate students may feel uneasy with programmes based on standard ODL approaches because their own learning habits do not fit well in the ODL system. The different needs of females and of neo-literate students, and their preferences and learning styles should be kept in mind at the time of designing the programmes and throughout the courses

especially in those programmes that generally aim to cater to these students.

The curriculum of vocational programmes needs to be updated very frequently. It is difficult to make frequent changes in the instructional materials due to lack in experts and lack in time and money for making revision. Also, frequent changes in the printed instructional materials lead to wastage in materials. The instructional materials of frequently changed programmes should be kept modular, so that the materials can be easily revised efficiently without disturbing other modules. This concept is similar to object-oriented concepts used in the computer discipline. The instructional materials of the web-based education programmes should be developed using similar kinds of concepts.

Youth can be encouraged to join education programmes by providing scholarships, financial aid or subsidizing the fees. It is found that some people join government-sponsored programmes only where a large segment of the programme fee is borne by the government, in the anticipation to get hold of the scholarship or monetary support from the government. The contents of these training programmes have little relevance to their life or profession, and such people vanish once they have taken the monetary benefits. The purposes of conducting the training never become realized in such cases. The institutions should more carefully select which people may become students in these programmes. Training should be provided only to deserving candidates not to money seekers. The many organizations involved should work together to help in identifying the most suitable candidates for financially-supported programmes.

The usefulness of the programmes depends upon the effectiveness of the connections of the institution with industries and with the local agencies involved in developing and offering the programmes. A number of NGOs and other groups have been working in the NE region for a long time. These organizations are deeply rooted in the society there and have good understanding of the local cultures, languages, ways of life and the ethos. These

organizations can act as education-serving nodes to deliver programmes throughout the NE region. The involvement of well-reputed local bodies will convince the local people to join the institution. Nagaland Government has formed a Village Education Committee (VEC) to monitor the academic, administrative and financial management of local educational institutes. The VEC committee consists of local educationists, village elders and head of the village. The VECs are highly successful in monitoring and improving the quality of education without any intervention from the government. The objective of the Mahila Samakhya project is to empower women through education. The Mahila Samakhya experience has demonstrated that poor rural women become more confident and enjoy their learning when the resource person is one of them. They find a stronger voice and work as a resource for others (Dighe, 2000). Institutions can repeat the successes of the VEC and Mahila Samakhya by involving society in different capacities in the various activities of the university. This step will pave the way for more involvement of the communities in the institution programmes and help in raising the sense of community ownership.

Some difficulties remain, for example in providing student support, and in improving communications. The remote and tribal areas can be supported through mobile counseling centres. The mobile counseling van should visit remotes areas on a regular basis. A mobile counseling centre should be well equipped with books, multimedia facilities, computers, and wireless connectivity (Wi-Fi). The institution may select a person from the local community to coordinate the various activities of the institution and communicate the schedules of the visits of mobile study centre van.

IGNOU's TV transmission through Gyan Darshan channel has limited viewer-ship as it can be seen only with the help of special antenna. Viewers need to have either cable connection or buy an expensive down-link antenna. The viewer-ship can be improved, if transmission of the Gyan-Darshan channel is made accessible through ordinary TV channels.

The teaching and administrative staff at the study centres are not regular employees of IGNOU. They are not serious about their roles and usually neglect their duties. There should be at least one person employed by IGNOU on a long-term basis at each study centre, who will monitor and report back on the effectiveness of all the various activities on behalf of the university.

The NE region has an intense military network due to the prevailing insurgency, activities by underground outfits, and extensive international borders. A large number of army personnel are deployed in this area. There is a strong network of military bases in the region. There was little harmony in the relations between the army and the local community in the past. Local people had barely any faith in the military and were sympathetic towards a few radical fundamentalists and terrorist groups. In last few years however, there have been tremendous changes in the attitudes of the local community towards the army. Now the local people have entrusted more faith in their army. IGNOU has been already offering educational programmes for in-service army personnel under the MOU signed with the Assam Rifles Regiment. The military base camps act as study centres for army personnel. The services of these study centres can be extended to civilian learners residing nearby. This step not only serves the learning needs of the common man in these remote areas but also promotes understanding, goodwill and harmony between the military and the civilians.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS :

The ODL system in India previously confined itself to the institution-centered education model, and the ODL system mainly focused on offering formal education programmes. The delivery mode of the ODL system was based on printed text materials. Since the 1980s, The open market economy has created an economic imbalance among various segments of the society. The open market economy creates the demand for continuing and extension

education. At the same time, ICT applications have brought considerable opportunities for the delivery of ODL-based programmes. The ICT applications have added both flexibility and interactivity to the programmes. Now these ODL systems can effectively meet the demands of continuing and extension education. The NE region has much potential for development but the environment in the region is not conducive for investment. This region has been suffering from bad socio-economy and poor infrastructure. Institutions can use ODL systems to reach the un-reached segment of the society by offering quality education. The educational institutions led by IGNOU should further grasp these opportunities and engage the challenges for bringing prosperity to everyone in the North East Region.

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Sunil KUMAR [sunilk@ignou.ac.in](mailto:sunilk@ignou.ac.in) and Dr Neelam CHAUDHARY, are Analysts, and Girija SHANKAR is Research Officer, at the Project Facilitation Unit, Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU). Maidan Garhi, New Delhi 110 068, India.