Universalisation of Primary Education and ICT Initiatives in India

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Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) has been conceived as a government of India national educational movement to achieve the target of universalization of primary education among all children. This ambitious programme has been supported by several international and national funding agencies and success stories are coming up from different states. Distance education with the advent of digital technologies, has become an alternate or supplement to the conventional education. A host of technologies are there to make learning interactive. Policy makers and academicians have recognized this fact and therefore have naturally selected it as an important strategy for the implementation of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan.

Multimedia content is very much important for the development of interactive learning material like interactive CD or dynamic websites. Considering the multi-lingual character of our country, we should be able to have online translations of such web content.

UNESCO has underlined the importance of providing educational access to all children in the age group of 6-14 with international aid programmes for universalisation of education. In India, it heralded in the early 1990s. ‘The forerunner of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) was one of the largest of such programmes in the world when implemented’. DPEP was formerly launched in the early 90s, with the main purpose of accelerating the pace of Universalisation of Primary Education (UPE). DPEP is a centrally sponsored scheme implemented by state level agencies. Several international agencies have funded for the DPEP programme in different states and the assistance from IDA is significant among them.

The concept of UPE emanates from the Education for All (EFA) declaration adopted by the World Conference on EFA, held in Thailand in the month of March 1990. This resolution sought to meet the basic learning needs of all the children into two categories: i) essential learning tools such as literacy, oral expression, numeracy and problem solving ii) basic learning content such as knowledge, skills, values and attitudes.

The success of DPEP in Alternate Schooling (AS) was replicated on large scale with many of its elements having been incorporated in the Education Guarantee Scheme and Alternative and Innovation Education (EGS & AIE). As a result of the efforts made by the Central and State governments, ‘94 percent of the country’s rural population has been provided with primary schools within one km and 84 percent have upper primary schools within three kilometres. National Elementary Education Mission was conceived for facilitating the achievement of Universalisation of Primary Education (UPE) in a systematic sustained and integrated manner, involving all segments of society in this national endeavour’. 
The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) is a concerted effort of the Government of India to provide useful and relevant elementary education for all children in the 6-14 age groups by 2010. Another goal of SSA is to bridge the social, regional and gender gaps in education and give meaning to elementary education with the active participation of the community in the management of schools. The Development of the SSA programme is an offshoot of very many deliberations held at the level of policy makers and educationists of the country.

The main objectives of SSA are listed below:
• All children in school, Education Guarantee Centre, Alternate School, ‘Back-to-School’ camp by 2003
• All children complete five years of primary schooling by 2007
• All children complete eight years of elementary schooling by 2010
• Focus on elementary education of satisfactory quality with emphasis on education for life
• Bridge all gender and social category gaps at primary stage by 2007 and at elementary education level by 2010
• Universal retention by 2010

Glaring feature of SSA is that it lays a special thrust on making education at the elementary level useful and relevant for children by improving the curriculum, child centred activities and effective teaching-learning activities. As we know, in any educational activity, teacher has a catalytic and noble role to play and SSA recognises these. “SSA recognises the critical and central role of teachers and advocates focussing on their development needs. Setting up of Block Resource Centres/Cluster Resource Centres, recruitment of qualified teachers, opportunities for teacher development through participation in curriculum-related material development, focus on classroom process and exposure visits for teachers are all designed to develop the human resource among teachers.”

**ICT and UEE**

ICT (Information and Communication Technology) enabled distance education is poised to rule the world. This would not only strengthen the elementary education needs of the country but also would increase the dependence of education on ICT. Technological development always warrants transition to newer technologies by jeopardising the cost effectiveness of the distance education programme. Retaining the already existing technologies for a considerable period of time and subsequently embracing new technologies should have fine balancing, so as to improve also the quality of education.

India is one among the few countries in the world, which has not allowed the expenditure on education to shrink over the years. The increase in expenditure on elementary education alone over the last four Five Year Plan periods has been more than the increase in expenditure on education as a whole. With all the inputs around, there is only hope for enhancing the quality of education at the elementary stage.

Education, as we know is instrumental in ensuring that the future generation is well informed and competent. Unfortunately, because the quality and accessibility of education varies so greatly between regions, the school system of our country often fail to deliver the
level of education necessary to ensure such competency. Many schools have limited resources for buying books, stationery, furniture and other classroom materials. Teachers lack adequate qualification and training to engage their students in learning. Their lesson plans are most often outdated or irrelevant. These jeopardise the available quality of education. ICT enabled distance education, to a great extent, can combat this problem. Because the present day distance learning is ICT-enabled, most of the programmes include computer and Internet training to facilitate the use of essential technology. The acquisition of fundamental ICT skills among teachers and students helps knowledge sharing, thereby multiplying educational opportunities. However, all teachers are not willing to introduce new technologies to themselves first and subsequently to their students. In order to implement ICT-driven distance education programme, the teachers must first understand and be comfortable with the technologies. They must be given opportunities for acquisition of a new knowledge. It all can begin by promoting computer-training programmes for teachers. Monetary incentives can be offered as means of motivation.

The use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) can effectively enhance learning where traditional models have failed. While these technologies offer advantages, they also pose challenges. Several studies have been conducted in the west about the use of ICT in Middle and High School students. Martin Carnoy has made painstaking study on this matter and these results are available in his inaugural lecture of ICT in Education: Possibilities and Challenges-2004-05 Academic Year. According to him, ‘Using ICT as a supplement to improve test score results, may, however, be seen to be more effective than traditional teaching alone, hence is much more applied.’ He also comments about the use of ICT for teacher and administrator training. ‘Private firms such as Sylvan quickly saw the potential of ICT as an in-service training medium for teachers, and this now forms an important part of Sylvan’s extensive ICT learning systems… An entirely different approach to teacher improvement is web access to course content, lesson plans and network to other teachers. This or content, approach is used by Net Schools and the IBM foundation. Both of these organisations focus on using ICT as teacher training for course content rather than improving pedagogy.’

It can be seen that Distance Learning Technologies have been employed in the education of teachers both at pre-service level and at In-service level. UNESCO has published a summary of case studies conducted in nine countries in different parts of world and most of these studies reflect the necessity of having multi-prong strategy for teacher education and to improve their expertise. For example, ‘in China television has been tremendously used for teacher education. In India, there is a multimedia approach for teacher education. In UK, due to heavy shortage of teachers of Mathematics and Science, the Department of Education invited tenders…..the Open University was successful in this and the result was Open University’s Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) programme, where ICT plays a large role in enabling interaction between students, tutors, regional support centres and programme providers’.

In 1996, Distance Education has been naturally chosen as a catalyst for expediting Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). An MOU was signed between MHRD and IGNOU in November 1996 and thereafter; a full-fledged office was set up for this purpose. But still SSA need
attention in terms of ICT application.

To achieve UEE there is a need for following initiatives
- involvement of stake holders, particularly primary school teachers while preparing any material or training package with the help of experts from technology, media and concerned subject areas.
- to effect synergic match between technology and pedagogy with sensitivity to cultural specificity.
- preparation of model multimedia training packages at national level as exemplary material for subsequent adoption by the participating states
- establishment of national web based resource centre and multi channel forum

Source: [http://southasia.oneworld.net/](http://southasia.oneworld.net/)
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