



## OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO LEARNING: WOMEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR

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### Abstract:

*For the overall growth of any nation, it is important that both men and women of that country are educated but sadly the global female literary figures depict a very sad picture. The female literacy rate is quite low worldwide. In South Asia there exists huge gender gap with low literacy of females. In countries where over all literacy rates are comparatively low, male/female and urban/rural disparities are also large. Women's literacy is the crucial importance in addressing wider issues of gender inequality. In a country like India, 70 women are literate for every 100 literate men.*

*The present paper would try to explore how women who have limited access to education worldwide can be benefitted by distance education. Women who are full time house wives, who have never had access to formal education or had to give up school at early stages of their lives etc can take to distance education since it allows them to sit at home and study for a programme without jeopardizing their marriages or abandon their children.*

*The paper would focus on the education sector in J&K which has remained one of the worst hit sectors and how distance education can help women seek education who are living in this conflict-hit area and have no access to education. Distance education can also help streamline the education sector. This will certainly help in nation building and may also serve as an instrument for development and lead to empowerment and social upliftment of women in Jammu and Kashmir.*

### KEY WORDS:

Kashmir, women, education, conflict, distance education, gender gap.

### INTRODUCTION

Education is the basic right of all the girls. It is the only instrument which can effectively contribute to the emancipation of women in a developing country like India. Through education only, women can overcome the barriers that they face for it is the basic tool for their empowering and thus bringing them into the mainstream of development. Education not only provides knowledge and skills to improve health and livelihoods, but it also empowers women to take their right place in the society and development process besides giving them status and confidence in decision making.

According to the UNFPA (1994), education opens the opportunity and choice for women. When women are given the requisite education relevant to their needs and environment, they gradually become more visible and recognized in the mainstream of activities both at home and in society at large. As

education enhances women's sense of self-worth and confidence, they become more assertive of their roles in social activities and take initiatives for themselves rather than wait for the decisions to be made for them. Thus women's education which impacts the economical condition and reduction of the poverty of the country, plays an important role in the development of a nation.

The global education agenda has also raised awareness for the support of gender parity and gender equality in education. As the Human Development report for 1995 declares, 'If human development is not engendered, it is endangered'. Development goals now focus on gender equality and women empowerment. One of its goals is to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education at all levels of education by 2015, (UNESCO Global Monitoring Report, 2005). Therefore, the shift in the international education goals beyond gender parity to gender equality has had a positive influence in promoting a meaningful education agenda towards the education of females in relation to males.

#### **GENDER GAP AND WOMEN EDUCATION**

According to World Bank (2000), there is horrible situation of female literacy worldwide with 880 million or more illiterate adults and youth, 60 percent of them women. There are 130 million out-of-school children aged 6-11 and about 60 percent of them girls. UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2006) says that the adult literacy rate for South Asia during the year 2002-04 was 58.7% for both sexes, for male 70.5% and for female 46.3%. These illiterates are the hindrance in the development of the nations. In South Asia there exists huge gender gap with low literacy of females. The present picture in South Asia indicates the huge challenges in the female literacy. In countries where over all literacy rates are comparatively low, male/female and urban/rural disparities are also large. Women's literacy is the crucial importance in addressing wider issues of gender inequality. In a country like India, 70 women are literate for every 100 literate men.

#### **DISTANCE EDUCATION FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT**

Most of the women worldwide have limited access to education opportunities which would have enhanced their empowerment otherwise Over 880 million illiterate adults in the world (UNESCO 2002) have been deprived access to education because they are required to be present in the four walls of a conventional classroom before they can gain access to quality education. Due to limitations in resources; both human and financial, the traditional conventional approach of teaching in classrooms can no longer satisfy the increasing population of a country like India which is world's second most populous country after China. Clearly, to meet this challenge there is a need to introduce Open and Distance Learning Model otherwise referred to as Distance Education.

Distance Education is defined by Rezabek (1999) as the transportation of information and the involvement of a learner in the acquisition of knowledge and understanding of an area of study through planned, usually structured, and organized (but also incidental) communication, that also uses supplemental resources and media-assisted two way communication. Distance learning reflects both the fact that all or most of teaching is conducted by someone removed in time and space from the learner and that the mission aims to include greater dimensions of openness, flexible learning opportunities to the learners are given, whether in terms of access, curriculum or other elements of structure and there is open access to education by everyone. It also allows for a high degree of flexibility for individuals pursuing education for professional purposes or as part of their leisure pursuits. Distance education provides opportunities for adults to change careers later in life; to enhance their skills and qualifications while retaining their jobs; to bring up a young family while continuing with their education; to keep up with ever-changing technologies; and to improve their social position and status.

#### **SCOPE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT**

The scope of distance education for women empowerment can well be gauged from the fact that it straddles so many facets of the social system. Women who are full time house wives, who have never had access to formal education or had to give up school at early stages of their lives, who are not usually enthusiastic about formal education for various reasons including husband and kids can take to distance education since it allows them to sit at home and study for a programme without jeopardizing their marriages or abandon their children. In a country like India where many women still adhere to Purdah system, they have been denied the access to formal education provided by schools and colleges because of their cultural and religious barriers. But now, women can have access to qualitative education through the open and distance learning approach that allows them to pursue their education at a 'safe distance' from the

instructors. They can study, turn in assignments and write examinations after adequate arrangements have been made.

**DISTANCE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN INDIA**

In India, distance education for higher education was initiated in the form of Correspondence Courses in 1962, in response to the ever-increasing demand for higher education which could not be met by the conventional system. The Delhi University established a School of Correspondence Courses and Continuing Education in 1962. Encouraged by the success, the Education Commission (1964-66) recommended the expansion of correspondence education for various purposes. Consequently, the University Grants Commission (UGC) formulated guidelines for introducing correspondence courses in Indian Universities. Three more Institutes of Correspondence Studies were established in the late sixties. Twenty one more universities introduced correspondence programmes during the seventies. In the early eighties seven more universities started institutes of correspondences studies. Andhra Pradesh government set up Andhra Pradesh Open University (later renamed as Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University) at Hyderabad in 1982. In 1985, the Govt. of India, through an Act of Parliament established the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) which is responsible for determining and maintaining standards of distance education and bringing about coordination among all distance education institutes including the open universities all over the country in addition to functioning as University for open learning and distance education programmes. Today we have over 15 open universities like Kota Open University in Kota (Rajasthan), Yashwant Rao Chavan Maharashtra Open University at Nasik (Maharashtra) and Nalanda Open University at Patna (Bihar). States of Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka were established.

As per the recommendations in the parliamentary standing committee's 172nd report on human resource development, for a vast country like India where accessibility to higher education is quite low, Open and distance learning has the vast potential for taking higher education to more and more people irrespective of different barriers. This system not only caters to in-service people but also to unreached masses of the society. As per the 11th five year plan, out of the total enrolment of learners in higher education, 7 million learners are enrolled with Open and Distance education. By 2017, this count is estimated to reach 16 million. A sum of Rs 8,116 crore has been assigned by the government of India to promote distance education throughout the country. The open and distance learning (ODL) system has emerged as a vibrant and dynamic component of higher education infrastructure in India. It provides access to quality education to about 25% of the total population of learners in the higher education sector.

**EDUCATIONAL SCENARIO IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR**

Education sector has remained one of the worst hit sectors in Kashmir valley in the past 20 years of armed insurgency. Though efforts are on to streamline the education sector in Kashmir Valley, but the violence that has continued in Jammu and Kashmir has contributed negatively to the education sector. Today, the state is lagging behind in the literacy rate and considered one of the most educationally backward states of the country. Jammu and Kashmir still ranks 33rd in literacy among the states of India. Only the newly created states of Jharkhand (54.13) and Bihar (47.53) are behind Jammu and Kashmir in the literacy rate. In female literacy (41.82 per cent), the state ranks 33rd among the rest of the states in India. The Literacy rate of the state of Jammu and Kashmir is 55.5%. The male literacy rate is 66.6% and the female literacy rate is 43%. In gender disparity also, J&K state is behind the national level and the level of its adjoining states.

Table 1: Female Literacy in Jammu and Kashmir

	RURAL	URBAN	COMBINED
Males	61.65	80.00	66.60
Females	36.74	61.98	43.00
Total	49.78	71.92	55.52

Source: Census of India 2001

### Situation Analysis of Women Education and Gender gap in literacy In Jammu and Kashmir

There is a large gap in the male female literacy in Jammu and Kashmir. This gap is more than the national average in 18 out of 22 districts of the state. Similarly the gap between rural and urban literacy is 22.1%. If we exclude the main urban centres of Srinagar and Jammu then this gap is further widened. There is a gap of 25% between the rural male and female literacy. In urban areas this gap is of the order of 18%. The district wise literacy scenario brings into sharp focus the inherent distortions in the delivery system of education. The literacy rate of district Kupwara is the lowest with 43.2%, the male literacy rate being 56.1% and female literacy rate 28.7% only. Besides this there are 11 districts where literacy rate is less than 50%. Jammu district has the highest literacy rate of 77% with 84.4% in males and 68.5% in females. In 18 districts out of the 22, the female literacy rate is less than 50%. The lowest female literacy rate is 28.7% in District Kupwara and the highest female literacy rate of 68.5% in Jammu district. There are 9 districts where female literacy rate in rural areas is even below 30%. There is a huge gap in male female literacy ratios also.

**Table 2: Literacy Rate – J&K and its adjoining states**

S.NO	STATE	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL	GENDER GAP IN LITERACY
1.	J&K	67	43	56	24
2.	Punjab	75	63	70	12
3.	Himachal Pradesh	85	67	77	18
4.	Haryana	79	56	68	23

**Source: Census of India 2001**

#### Barriers to girls' education in J&K:

Education of girls has been a high priority with the Government of India as well as J&K State Government. The Jammu and Kashmir government has been making initiatives as part of the strategic planning to reduce the gender gap in literacy. Despite this, the female literacy in the state is only 43 % as against the national average of 54 %. Gender differential exists both in rural and urban areas but it is high in rural areas. This can be attributed to a number of factors, e.g., lack of access to education, parents feeling insecure about sending girls to school in conflict situations prevailing in the volatile region, their engagement in agricultural and other domestic activities, prevailing prejudices, inadequate infrastructure, conservative religious society, accessibility of schools etc. Illiteracy remains at the centre of women empowerment issues in Jammu and Kashmir. Women are discriminated against in access to education for social and economic reasons. The enrollment of the girls is less than the boys at primary, middle and high level. This unequal situation has put the women backward and they are lagging behind of the men. In these conditions, there is need of another system of education with equal opportunities of education to male and female. Such system of education is 'Distance Mode of Education'.

### Distance Education in Jammu and Kashmir

Presently, the two main universities in the state, University of Jammu and University of Kashmir are having two departments of Distance Education which are wholly and solely catering to the long distance learning of both Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh regions respectively.

The Directorate of Distance Education, University of Jammu which was set up in 1976, was the first one to introduce correspondence/distance education system in the state of Jammu and Kashmir and thereby provide opportunities of higher education through distance mode as a viable alternative to formal system of education. The courses offered by the Directorate are intended to cater to the students who have had to discontinue their education in the regular system for various reasons; students in far flung and inaccessible hilly areas of Jammu and Kashmir state; the students who were not accommodated in the mainstream education institutions; in-service persons; women and individuals who regard education as a life time activity. It is an innovative system, which is academically sound and economically viable and as such, has proved to be a blessing for those who have no access to education.

Similarly, Kashmir University has also been catering to the students living in far flung militancy infested areas of the valley. In a volatile region where due to inherent factors and constraints, conventional education institutions were/are unable to cope up with the augmented demand for higher education, it has partly helped to cope up with this demand in the Jammu region. Both the departments have study centres in remote and geographically challenging areas like Poonch, Rajouri, Baderwah, Kishtwar, Anantnag, Baramulla, Karnah, Tangdar, Gurez, Leh, Kargil etc.

### The Need of Distance Education For Women in J&K

Distance education, undoubtedly, is the Mantra of tomorrow. As there exist gender disparities in formal system of education with respect to number of institutions and enrollment in Jammu and Kashmir, females can have greater number of chances for education through distance education rather than formal system education in J&K. The Distance Learning institutions may help to minimize the gender gap in education in Jammu and Kashmir. Distance education can hold tremendous benefits for the society in general and women learners in particular as women and girls residing in far flung and highly inaccessible militancy-hit areas of Jammu and Kashmir could benefit from this mode of learning. Distance learning is needed to achieve the cherished goal of the nation for universalization of education and thus can go a long way in increasing the literacy levels of women. Besides, women who may be geographical isolated because of distance or because a communication system has not been developed would want to avail this. It is also needed to meet the great demand for democratization of education from those sections of society that is neglected. It is also quite important for the women who had had previously been denied such opportunities.

As we have discussed earlier, distance education extends geographical access to education, expands the capacity for education in new and multidisciplinary subject areas and moreover offers the combination of education with work and family life; more and more women should be encouraged to adopt distance mode of learning for their education. More and more opportunities should be created for women to go for distance education programmes. Extensive research must be done on the educational needs of the women before programmes are launched. The programmes with the specific goal of training women for job market should be initiated and the women should be encouraged to join the professional courses. This will certainly help in nation building and may also serve as an instrument for development and lead to their social upliftment.

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