

## **Open & Distance Learning– A Policy Intervention for Inclusive Development & Mainstreaming of Marginalized Socio-Religious Communities– An Indian Case Study**

Dinesh Singh Bist, Secretary and Director(SSS), National Institute of Open Schooling, India, [secretary@nos.org](mailto:secretary@nos.org), [dsingh\\_bist@yahoo.co.in](mailto:dsingh_bist@yahoo.co.in)

One of the major concerns of governance in large, complex and pluralistic societies functioning in a liberal democratic framework is related to the position of its marginalized minority communities and their treatment by the nation at large. This becomes an urgent issue when seen in the background of the rapid socio-economic developments taking place in countries, like India, where this can become a potential source of tensions inbetween various communities, having unequal access to resources in the society. If the issues of access, equity and justice are not addressed in a democratic manner, they can cause disenchantment and frustration leading to further marginalisation of these communities and resultant conflict situations within and outside the countries.

At a global level, the developments and events including the 9/11 and post Iraq war scenario have forced international community to also address this issue. The entire debate has certainly created an appreciation of the fact that “Terrorism” has emerged to be the most important “shared concern” for the international community and there is an urgent consequent need to address it both at national and international level.

In the Indian context, all elected governments have made constant (but not necessarily consistent) endeavors to address concerns of access, equity and justice for their marginalized minority communities in spheres of education, employment and empowerment. The latest initiative in India, in the domain of public policy, was the setting up of a High Level Committee, known as Sachar Committee, on 9<sup>th</sup> March 2005 with an objective of identifying the areas of intervention by the Government of India to address relevant issues relating to the social, economic and educational status of Muslim Community.

This paper is an attempt to explore the potential role of National Institute of Open Schooling(NIOS) as an effective instrument of policy intervention by the state for inclusion of the Muslim community into the educational mainstream of India, more specifically in the light of the recommendations of Sachar Committee. It also includes some experimental steps taken by NIOS to implement the goals of public policy in the domain of education for the minority population.

### **SACHAR COMMITTEE – ROLE OF EDUCATION AND EMPIRICAL FINDINGS**

The Sachar Committee has recognized the vital role of education in facilitating social and economic development. Improvement in educational attainments will not only enhance productivity and economic empowerment of Socio-Religious Communities (SRCs) but also augment their democratic participation, upgrade their access to health and other quality of life indicators. For the purpose empirical studies and gathering field level data, for public policy, SRCs are generally categorised as Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Caste(OBC), Minorities (basically Muslims) and Others which include all remaining social groups (general caste, Hindus, non-Muslim minorities).

More specifically, the Sachar Committee rightly feels that in view of the high growth phase of the economy (9%+ pa), this is an opportune time to utilize new opportunities for skill development and education of these SRCs.

The findings of the Committee reveal that Muslim community has experienced educational deprivation both in absolute and relative terms and more importantly, the community itself feels discriminated against and is getting marginalized increasingly.

The data shows that the levels of literacy, which are 65.1% for the country as a whole are 59.1% for Muslims as SRCs. Only Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes(SCs/STs) have lower levels of literacy at 52.8%. This becomes even starker, when "All Others" as SRCs [meaning excluding Muslims and SC/ST from the total] show 70.8%. as literacy rate as compared to literacy rates of Muslims and SC/ST as SRCs.

In terms of comparison across SRCs in terms of Mean Years of Schooling (MYS), it can be seen that MYS for Muslim children (7-16) is lowest at 3 years and four months in comparison to the national average of 4 years, which is also unsatisfactory.

For catching relative educational deprivation, various qualitative indicators have been used by Sachar Committee such as enrollment rates and attendance rates. The statistics show that enrollment rates have increased for all SRCs and within that also SC/STs (95%) have overtaken Muslims (65%) although the gaps are narrowing down.

The Matriculation Completion Rates show that 26% of the population in 17+ years are matriculates at All India level, which comes down to 17% for Muslims.

### **Sachar Committee – Key Issues and Recommendations Related to Education**

Sachar Committee Report highlights that "School Education" is the "biggest hurdle" for the Muslims in improving their educational attainment. Within school education, it has identified "Elementary Education" as the stumbling block, which hinders access of Muslims to higher education/technical education, thereby restricting their employment and income generating potential. The Report (2006, p.243) recommendations state that "once the hurdle of School Education is crossed, the differences across most Socio-Religious Communities in the likelihood of completing graduate studies narrow down and are at times not very significant. Therefore a sharper focus on school education is desirable".

According to the Sachar Committee Report, (2006, p.79) "the advantage of providing education (especially primary education) in mother tongue is undisputed as it enables the child to understand and apply skills more easily." Further the non-availability of education in Urdu language is seen by some as one of the reasons for low educational status of Muslims in India.

According to the Report, the immediate interventions required to be made by the State are (a) in the field of elementary education (b) through promotion of Urdu medium schools (c) engagement of Urdu knowing teachers (d) integrating Madarasas/Maktabs into the mainstream of education providers.

It is in this context that the programmes and policies of NIOS need to be viewed so that the equitable education can be provided to these groups.

### **State Interventions for Implementation of Sachar Committee Recommendations through Open and Distance Learning (ODL) - Role of NIOS**

The basic philosophy of ODL promotes 'inclusion'. The aspect of 'Openness' ensures a place and space for all irrespective of caste, creed, religion, socio-economic status, boundaries of space and time. It is ideal for all those who have been left out from the educational mainstream. ODL is more favourable for countries having large populations and scarce resources. ODL does not require any explicit or obtrusive Affirmative Action, in terms of quantitative and qualitative restrictions like pre-defined quotas or reservations which may have multi-dimensional implications

in society. ODL mode of 'Educational Inclusion' is most appropriate for strengthening a growing economy and society in equitable and just manner without precipitating social tension.

NIOS, with more than 1.5 million learners on its cumulative roll, and a network of more than 3000 study centres in India and abroad, has emerged as the largest Open School in the world. It is uniquely positioned to provide educational opportunity to majority of school level learners from all marginalized communities including Muslim community. The NIOS as an institution providing a gamut of educational programmes through ODL is therefore viewed as one of the most appropriate state interventions for inclusion and mainstreaming of such marginalized SRCs and for providing them an opportunity for lifelong learning.

NIOS offers Academic Education and Vocational Education streams to its prioritized client groups including marginalized SRCs like Muslims. It utilizes existing educational infrastructure and human resources by partnering with formal schools, NGOs and other institutions for imparting these programmes. The major interventions carried out are as follow:

### **Academic Stream**

The NIOS programmes provide comprehensive alternative education programmes equivalent to those of the entire formal schooling system from class I to XII. This include (a) Open Basic Education (OBE) (b) Secondary and Senior Secondary programmes.

### **Open Basic Education Programme (OBE)**

The OBE comprises level A,B,C which are equivalent to elementary education class III,V and VIII of the formal school system. It provides a learning continuum for children of 6-14 years and adult neo-literates, school dropouts/ left outs and learners of other Non-Formal Education programmes.

Some of the distinguishing features of Open Basic Education (OBE) are that it is implemented in a highly decentralized manner with partnering agencies functioning below district level also, flexibility in the choice of curriculum as per local needs, customs and culture, freedom to develop their own material in local language, inclusion of vocational content based on local market demand.

Building upon the research which shows that persons learn best in their own mother tongue, NIOS gives institutions flexibility in making their learning package based upon the curriculum offered by the state or national education bodies (Boards, SCERT, NCERT, NIOS). They can thus develop their own materials in their local language/mother tongue and teach through the mother tongue (Urdu) as well.

A unique innovation has been the partnership with Madarsas and Maktabas which has been brought about through relaxation of NIOS norms for accreditation. This has obviated major impediments responsible for lack of access to the Elementary Education to Muslim girls in their immediate neighborhood and consequently their low enrolment ratios.

The linkages between education and livelihood are also well recorded. In order to help in poverty alleviation by training persons in different skills, NIOS encourages OBE institutions to offer vocational trades. In the case of Madarssas, this means that many traditional trades can be included in the learning content. Moreover this provides a foundation for learners to "branch off" subsequently into more professional vocational skills.

A unique experiment called the "Hunar" (The Skills Project) has been initiated by NIOS in collaboration with Government of Bihar. Under this free of cost skill development will be provided by NIOS to Muslim girls who are already enrolled in formal school at Upper Elementary Level. It is envisaged that this initiation in skills will lay the foundation stone for their economic empowerment subsequently. Seven courses have been identified at class V and VIII levels i.e.

B and C level of OBE for this programme. More than 12,000 girls have been enrolled for 2008-09 academic year. The Bihar Government has reimbursed the cost of their skill development by granting Rs. 18 million from its flagship literacy programme, Bihar Education Project(BEP), which in turn receives substantial funding from central government under its EFA programme, Sarv Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). The scheme will be extended in terms of coverage in Bihar in the coming years and, depending on its success, replicated in other states also. This is a path breaking field initiative where open schooling has been used to reach the most difficult target group i.e. young Muslim girls and to overcome high barriers of access in the educationally backward state of Bihar. This project also highlights the close collaboration between different stakeholders like Central Government (NIOS), State Government (BEP), local community schools (Maktabs/Madarssas) and educational/community leaders and organizations like Imarate-Sharia/Rahmani Foundation to attain the common goal of EFA.

### **Secondary and Senior Secondary Education Programmes**

NIOS offers its Secondary and Senior Secondary courses in Urdu medium, which is specially suited to needs of the Muslim community today. At Secondary level NIOS offers 26 subjects in seven language mediums (including Urdu) and at Senior Secondary level it offers 24 subjects in 3 mediums including Urdu. NIOS has also developed course material for Arabic and Persian subjects at Secondary level. Audio-video programmes are also available in Urdu medium. Learners also have the facility to write their examinations in Urdu.

At this level, the partnering agencies are formal schools operating under recognition of various State Education or Central Boards of Education termed as AIs or study centres of NIOS . NIOS also accredits study centres for Urdu medium learners. These AIs provide services including personal contact programmes to support distance learners.

### **Vocational Education Programmes**

The Sachar Committee Report (2006, p.65) makes a strong case for Technical Education and Training for non-matriculantes. It observes that “Artisanship is a dominant activity among Muslims. Technical training should be provided to even those who may not have completed schooling” Further the Report notes that, “majority of Muslim girls and boys fail in their matriculation examinations or dropout before that”. The Report(2006,p244) recommends that this group of children who have completed middle school (upto class VIII) but have not managed to study further need to be incorporated in different type of technical training”.

The NIOS Open Vocational Education Programme provides for multi-skill, multi-entry, multi-exit, flexible credit based courses to the learners. NIOS has developed ‘73’ Vocational courses, depending upon area specific demand for skills. It has already started translation of these courses in Urdu medium.

NIOS accredits specialized public/private institutions/ NGOs having facilities for training in various vocational trades as its study centres viz Accredited Vocational Institutions (AVIs). The Open Vocational Education Programme follows a collaborative model for implementation with partnerships with various trade and industry bodies like Federation of Indian Confederation of Commerce Industry (FICCI), Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), Indian Medical Association (IMA), Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI). These bodies also provide feedback regarding type of skills demanded by the market, level of skills and the approach for standardization and testing these skills. Entrepreneurship is an essential part of all Vocational Education courses of NIOS.

### **SPECIAL INTERVENTION BY NIOS- MINORITY CELL**

In keeping with the government’s commitment to work for the welfare of its minorities, NIOS has set up a ‘Minority Cell’ with `4’ fold objectives:

(a) To have a single window for dealing with work of Minority Educational Institutions

(b) To launch special advocacy programme focusing on extending reach and impact of NIOS to various SRC's with particular emphasis on Muslims. This is done through a multi-pronged strategy such as developing special advocacy films, documentaries, audio-video publicity materials, organizing seminars/conferences, interaction with social/religious community leaders of Minorities, social activists, NGOs.

(c) Appointing local persons as Project Coordinators for different states for promotion of educational activities amongst minorities in difficult to reach areas.

(d) Initiating wider consultation with local community/religious leaders to work out "relaxed-norms" for accreditation of Traditional Educational Institutions of Educationally Backward Minorities (Muslims) for strengthening their linkages with NIOS. It is mentioned that under the existing norms of accreditation, most of the Maktabas, Madarsas and many Darul-ul-Uloom (even like world famous ones at Deoband and Aligarh etc.), are not eligible for accreditation to NIOS. Consequently the learners in these Traditional Educational Institutions do not have access to any nationally recognized educational certification, which means that they remain largely out of the mainstream.

In order to establish linkages with minority institutions, NIOS was identified as a lead institution by National Monitoring Committee for Minority Education. NIOS in turn is working at becoming one of the first government institutions to relax its norms on the basis of consensus arrived at after wider consultations with all stakeholders and approval of the Government of India. By this major policy change, NIOS will be able to establish linkages with vast number of maktabas/madarsas in unorganised sector (roughly 80% of the total Traditional Educational Institutions of Muslims fall in this category). Due to this, learners enrolled with them will be able to have access to NIOS for getting Duniyavi Taleem (worldly learning) along with Deeni Taleem (religious learning) that is being imparted by these Traditional Educational Institutions in harmony with each other. This NIOS initiative would ensure that the avenues for higher education based on a nationally recognized certificate as well as greater livelihood options are opened for this section of society.

The table beneath shows the impact of Minority Cell in terms of share of minority education institutions in the overall reach of NIOS:

| S. No. | Accredited Study Centres                                       | Total no. of accreditation granted | No. of Minority Educational Institutions granted accreditation | Percentage (%) share of Minority accredited institutions |
|--------|----------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| 1.     | Accredited Institutions for Academic courses                   | 2276                               | 200                                                            | 8.79                                                     |
| 2.     | Accredited Vocational Institutions AVIs for Vocational courses | 1045                               | 139                                                            | 13.30                                                    |
| 3.     | Accredited Agencies for Open Basic Education Programme         | 327                                | 22                                                             | 6.73                                                     |

## Conclusion

The 11<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan envisages Universalisation of Secondary Education (USE) in which Open Schooling would have to meet the educational need of 15% of the total school going children. This has led to much new thinking and planning within NIOS. Consequently it is visualized that NIOS must transform itself in structural and functional terms so as to evolve into a more flexible and true Open Distance Learning system. The new strategies being considered by NIOS include Online Admissions that are available throughout the year to ensure better access to educational

facilities for learners as per their convenience. For the first time, NIOS is also now getting data on actual numbers of learners from various SRCs, which can be used to analyse the degree of access of NIOS to these groups. It is also proposed to further expand the existing flexible system of examination through On Demand Examination System (ODES) throughout the year. It is envisaged that this would result in the multiplication of the scale of operations of NIOS from just 0.3 million to almost 1 million learners getting enrolled per year students every year. ( Bist, 2008)

Therefore, there is no doubt that the recommendations of Sachar Committee have come at an appropriate time as they provide insight into some of the future growth paths for SRCs. They also give the desired direction for future expansion of NIOS as an ODL system thereby enabling the state to use NIOS as a policy intervention for promoting greater equity and justice in society, and creating a learning society. This main streaming of a sizeable population of India will also ensure that unemployed, underemployed, uneducated youth of these marginalized SRCs will not fall prey to divisive, disruptive anti-social and anti-national forces. It will rather ensure that all citizens become valuable human resources, making fruitful contribution in the growth of economy and emergence of a just and equitable society in the coming years.

### **References**

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