

Improving the Quality of Life of Rural Youth through Distance Education

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Sub-theme: *Quality (Promotion of life-long learning for upgrading skills and knowledge to suit the challenges of the global environment)*

Abstract

The technological advances have refined the education system and the paradigm shift towards improving the quality of life has lent it a benign characteristic. With India having an advantage because of its ‘demographic dividend’, where more than 65 per cent of its population is less than the age of 35 years, it is high time that the youth be aggrandized with knowledge and skills that help them raise their quality of life. In this paper, the authors discuss the importance of identifying the needs of rural youth in particular, and skilling them with courses such as Tribal Development Management, Sustainable Rural Development and Geospatial Technology Applications in Rural Development. For instance, the course on Tribal Development Management helps youth in learn the importance of social inclusion in the society along with various livelihood options available for Tribals and the policy interventions required for their upliftment. The course on Sustainable Rural Development would help them learn that the development which meets the need of the present generation of rural people should not compromise the capacity of future generations and the course on Geospatial Technology Applications would help them explore the importance of technology for empowering people at local level through planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of rural development projects. There can be many other courses that deal with rural governance, waste management, etc. that are the need of the hour. These courses when offered in distance education, and accessed by the marginalized section, especially the rural youth, inculcate in them the basic understanding in the domain of Rural Development, and in turn enhance their career scope and in turn, quality of life as well. The enriched knowledge helps people to tackle the global challenges in a better manner.

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Introduction and Background

India stands at an advantage with a big demographic dividend as compared to other developing nations. Out of the total of 1210.2 million population in India, the size of rural population is 833.1 million or 68.84% of the Total Population (Census 2011). Of this population, 19% is the youth population, majority of which belongs to the lowest rung of the ladder. Various government schemes and policy interventions have been designed over the years to empower this section of the society. One of such schemes is Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) which aims to bridging social, regional and gender gaps by providing free and compulsory education to all children aged 6-14 years (SSA, 2011). Though such schemes have made sure that all children are educated by attending to classroom education, there is a section of society that stands devoid of such opportunities. Due to various reasons such as being engaged in a job, familial issues, paucity of funds, access to schools, etc. create a need for distance education.

As per data available for 2016, there are 707 districts and 640867 villages in India (Wikipedia). The main focus of the government has been to see that effective planning and decentralization takes place at the grassroots level. This is essential to leverage the strength of the common people. For this, there is a high demand for rural development professionals who can work diligently at the field level while taking into account the nuances that occur every day. Such kind of well-trained and well-equipped cadre of rural development professionals are required to work at village levels, block levels and also at the district levels. They need to be well-versed with the various rural development schemes and programs including the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY), Panchayati Raj programs, Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY), Drinking Water and Sanitation and Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM), Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY), National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Mid-Day Meal (MDM), National Social Assistance program (NSAP), Total Sanitation Campaign (TSC) and Backward Regions Grant Fund (BRGF) that cover almost all domain under the sun such as employment generation, sanitation, health, education, infrastructure, etc.

Once the youth are well-versed with the basic norms for implementation of the program and are able to understand the governmental and organizational structure, they are more able to weave together the warps and wefts of the rural development domain. Moreover, they have multiple avenues to seek employment with such as NGOs, Social enterprises, Skilling organizations and CSR initiatives. The youth who take these course are best suited for working in institutions and initiatives those cater to the needs of rural poor. There are corporate bodies as well that are constantly looking for special team of rural development management professionals who understand the complex dynamics and behavior of rural society and its institutions (Debapriya and Prasad, 2012).

Course offered in Distance Education

National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, Hyderabad stands as a pioneer institute in delivering training and research in the domain of rural development. To cater to the needs of students, some courses were conceptualized and offered through distance education mode. It was felt that the rural youth are most vulnerable sections of the society in terms of access to education, be it vocational or higher degrees. There are various reasons for the same. Most of the rural youth are not exposed to the courses available to them which might interest them too. They are engaged in agricultural practices and do not have enough time to explore other careers. They are either married off or burdened with familial responsibilities. Moreover, financial constraints also play a hindrance. Hence, distance education courses suit them most. They need not be physically present to attend classes. They may access the content online and offline and write the tests as per their convenience. They may pursue these course along with meeting their other responsibilities. Keeping all the above points in mind, courses were designed. The authors discuss three courses in detail in this paper, namely Post Graduate Diploma in Tribal Development Management (TDM), Post Graduate Diploma in Sustainable Rural Development (PGDSRD) and Post Graduate Diploma in Geospatial Technology Applications in Rural Development (PGDGARD). For instance, the course on Tribal Development Management helps youth to learn the importance of social inclusion in the society along with various livelihood options available for Tribals and the policy interventions required for their up-liftment. The course on Sustainable Rural Development would help them learn that the development which meets the need of the present generation of rural people should not compromise the capacity of

future generations and the course on Geospatial Technology Applications would help them explore the importance of technology for empowering people at local level through planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of rural development projects. There can be many other courses that deal with rural governance and panchayati raj, rural livelihoods, agricultural extension, sanitation, skill development, social and community mobilization, and waste management that are the need of the hour. The authors discuss the need for the above mentioned courses, as well as the reach of the program.

1. ***Post Graduate Diploma in Sustainable Rural Development:*** The dimension of sustainability accrues that resources are used optimally and conserved in such a manner that the future generations also benefit from them. The course would deal with Rural Society and Sustainable Development, Policies and Programmes for Rural Development, Resources and Livelihoods, Project Planning and Management, Stakeholders in Rural Development, and Appropriate Technologies and Practices for Sustainable Development. Thus, through this course the youth are able to explore various resources of livelihoods, learn about project management and mainly explore the key concept of “sustainability”.
2. ***Post Graduate Diploma in Tribal Development Management:*** The Tribals in the country is 10.45 crore as per Census 2011 constituting 8.6% of the total population of the country and are scattered over the states of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. There are various schemes to uplift the status of Tribals implemented by the government of India. However, multiple challenges such as geographical isolation, economic backwardness and social exclusion, the Tribals are unaware of these schemes or are not able to fully utilize the benefits accrued to them by these aforementioned schemes. However, a course such as TDM helps the rural youth know and be informed about the initiatives taken by the governments for their welfare. Not only that, when this course is offered in a distance mode, rural youth from distant places who cannot afford to attend mainstream colleges or universities, are able to take this course. The course cover Tribal Society, Culture, Polity and Economy, State and Scheduled Tribes, Tribal Development Administration and Management, Project Management and Tribal Quest for Rights and Entitlements and Human Resource Management.
3. ***Post Graduate Diploma in Geospatial Technology Applications in Rural Development:*** This course was designed keeping in view of helping all sectors directly concerned with planning and

implementation of Projects and Programmes for Rural Development viz. Sectoral Activities like Education, Health, Forestry, Agriculture, Engineering, Roads, Infrastructure, ICT, Irrigation, Drinking Water, Disaster Management, Planning, Monitoring, Fishing, Animal Husbandry and the like. The course talks about Satellite Remote Sensing, Spatial Data Analysis and Modeling, Rural Infrastructure Management, Natural Resource Management, Disaster Management, Spatial Decision Support System for Rural Development, etc. It will help the youth in rural sector develop an insight in relating technology to rural development in a wider perspective. Being equipped with IT knowledge and skill helps the youth explore better prospects in their lives as far as their development is concerned.

Reach of the Courses

The NIRDPR facilitates the students to enroll in the above mentioned courses offered through distance education. Herein, the authors discuss the reach of the programs in detail.

Table 1: Reach of the three courses					
		PGD in Sustainable Rural Development	PGD in Tribal Development Management	PGD in Geospatial Technology Applications in Rural Development	Total
		2010-2016	2012-2016	2015-2016	
No. of students enrolled	Girls	207	37	237	481
	Boys	1280	207	1487	2974

As can be inferred from Table 1, the three programs started in 2010, 2012 and 2015 respectively. The total number of girls who have until now pursued these course is 481 and that of boys is 2974. It can also be inferred from the table that more number of students have opted for the course on Geo-Spatial Technological applications in RD thus showing a keen inclination towards IT based course.

Discussion

These courses when offered in distance education and accessed by the marginalized section, especially the rural youth, inculcate in them the basic understanding in the domain of Rural Development, and in turn enhance their quality of life. They are skilled to be able to help their community in capacity building and are able to make informed choices about their entitlements. The motivated rural youth are able to share their knowledge on rural development with their peers. The courses help to build and strengthen the rural youth and their communities. They are able to acquire requisite knowledge and skill that are needed in the rural development scenario and they are able to raise their levels of income and consumption. Through the various courses on rural development being offered in distance education mode, various new avenues and opportunities for employment in rural areas emerge for the rural youth. Multiple development initiatives of the government, NGOs and other civil society organizations, CSR initiatives, and skilling organizations offer great employment potential for such youth. They are able to either start an enterprise or get jobs in development sector and opt for a better livelihood option. These courses help them develop a different perspective and outlook towards their society, development issues, factors of vulnerabilities, attitudes toward the poor and the down trodden. Apart from the aforementioned effects, one major impact is on the factor of migration. The enhanced knowledge and employability helps to restrict push migration of the rural youth from rural areas to the urban areas.

Conclusion

The enriched knowledge helps people to tackle the global challenges in a better manner. The courses on different subjects of rural development, help youth to enhance their knowledge and skills. Looking at the great demand and need of such courses, NIRDPR is planning to expand the gamut of courses being offered through distance education. Courses are being developed on Decentralized governance, good governance and watershed management. In the long run, through the help of these courses that are offered through distance education, the idea of strengthening the youth of the country, especially the rural youth will be met in *toto*. Universities, colleges and academic institutions with domain knowledge should come forward and launch such programmes under distance education to enhance employability of rural youth.

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