

Empowerment through Research: a KKHSOU perspective

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The process of doing research as a PhD scholar is an arduous task. The scholar undergoes a lot of emotional stress throughout this period. Scholars doing PhD under Open University are no different. The Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University of Assam has been offering PhD degree since 2008-09. Since then, more than 50 students have been enrolled in this programme and a few of them have been awarded PhD.

The objective of conducting this research was to understand the impact of an Open University as an institution of higher learning on the lives of the Scholars. The paper is a qualitative study of the doctoral research scholars of KKHSOU, which is based in Assam. Interview method was used to explore the emotions of the candidates who have been awarded PhD under the University.

The study reveals the rise in the aspiration of the candidates and the desire to look for better opportunities. The narrative from the perspective of the Scholars also brings into light the problems they faced while going through the process of doing research.

The study has a wide scope as it offers opportunities for more research in this area.

Keywords: Distance Learning, Doctoral Research, Open University, Empowerment

Introduction:

Higher education for women has often been limited to college education for many in our country. It is only a recent phenomenon that more and more coming out to pursue research and other areas of higher knowledge. The patriarchal nature of the society is to blame as much which has played a crucial role in limiting the choices for the women. Times have changed and women have made advancement in the field of science and technology and breaking many stereotypical boundaries. These days they have access to quality education in the institutions of higher learning and knowledge.

But a look into the statistical data presents a slight different picture. Interestingly, women enrolment in higher education on the eve of independence was less than 10 percent. This number rose up to 46.93 percent in the year 2014-15, according to the UGC Annual Report. With more than 4000 women colleges for better accessibility of higher learning, participation of women in higher education should have been stronger in number than the mere figure of 46.93 percent. Faculty wise, women students have been seen to prefer Arts discipline followed by Science and then Commerce or Management courses. The enrolment is highest in the Under-Graduate level with 86.26 percent of the total enrolment. For research, the enrolment is very poor, 0.67 percent. Therefore, it will not be hard to assume that the number of women pursuing research would be smaller in number than their male counterpart.

In Indian Higher Education system, PhD was seen as a career in the academic world which was highly prestigious. But in recent times, PhD is seen as a degree that is pursued right after the completion of the Masters degree. While the debate still continues regarding the quality output of the “research community”, the enrolment in PhD is very low. In 2011-12, the number of students engaged in the field of research was less than .5 percent.

The following table below reveals the participation of women in Higher Education in India and also highlights the inequalities that is appalling.

Enrolment of women in Higher Education

Year	Enrolment (%)
2005-06	40.50
2014-15	46.93

Source: UGC Annual Report 2014-2015

The table above paints an encouraging trend of women participation in higher or tertiary education but it also reveals that is not at par with the male. Inclusiveness in higher education is yet a distant dream, with inequality being rampant. According to the Inclusive Development Index Report enrolment in education is very low at all levels (World Economic Forum Report, 2017).

In the next table, enrolment trend of students under various departments is highlighted. Interestingly, the number of students doing research is very few.

Level Wise Student Enrolment in University Teaching Departments and University Colleges

Sl. No.	Faculty	Enrolment (%) 2005-06	Enrolment (%) 2014-15
1.	Graduate	88.91	86.26
2.	Post Graduate	9.42	11.09
3.	Research	0.64	0.67
4.	Diploma/Certificate	1.03	1.57
5.	Integrated	-	0.41

Source: UGC Annual Report 2014-2015

Research Method:

The paper is qualitative in its approach and

The participants were chosen as per the purposive sampling method. The total number of participants was 3, all of whom were female. The method of enquiry was basically the interview method. The questions were unstructured and spontaneous. The research was conducted in the University campus itself. It was easier for me to contact them for the follow up due to my position as the Coordinator.

Higher Education vis a vis Distance Education:

With the establishment of IGNOU in 1985, the foundation of distance education system was laid. Prior to it, the Delhi University School of Correspondence Courses and Continuing Education and the Andhra Pradesh Open University (1982), later known as Dr Bhim Rao Ambedkar Open University formally began offering distance courses.

Currently the country boasts of 13 State Open Universities and 1 National Open University and more than 200 Dual Mode Universities (traditional universities offering distance courses through a separate Directorate).

After three decades of its existence, the Distance Education (DE) system has transformed from a correspondence model to a more technologically advanced mode. Today, Distance Education is popularly termed as E-Learning, Open, Distance and E-learning, Open Learning etc. From a humble beginning as a Corresponding Course Institute (Delhi University), we are now talking of Virtual University.

The enrolment in distance learning has been steadily going high. According to the All India Survey on Higher Education Report 2012-13, the enrolment in distance learning was estimated at 29.6 million of the total enrolment in higher education. This means that 11.9 percent learners are enrolled under the distance mode. The enrolment of women under ODL was 43.9 percent according to the AISHE Report of 2012-13.

Gender and Workforce:

The low participation of women in workforce has affected their social status and living standards. This raises serious questions on inclusiveness as reported in the Insight Report by the World Economic Forum.

Gender gap in employment has been a major issue of concern in many nations. The figure below reveals the crisis, as per the International Labour Organization Report. The South Asian region seems to be a problematic area.

Figure: Gender Gap in employment-to-population ratios

Gender Gap (percentage points)			
Region	2002	2007	2012 (p)
World	24.8	24.6	24.8
Developed Economies and European Union	16.7	15.7	13.2
Central and South-Eastern Europe (non-EU)& CIS	16.9	17.8	18.7
East Asia	10.9	11.2	11.4
South East Asia and the Pacific	23.3	22.6	22.3
South Asia	45.7	45.9	48.1
Latin America and the Caribbean	30.3	28.2	26.0
Middle East	52.6	52.0	52.8
North Africa	49.5	48.4	48.5
Sub-Saharan Africa	12.9	11.7	11.6

- Preliminary estimates

Source: ILO, 2012.

Reports have suggested that the number of economically active men is higher than the women. According to the ILO Report of 2012, the number of economically active women was 9.6 million as compared to the men which was 71 million. The huge gender gap can be easily surmised from the above figure. According to the same report, the labour force participation of women has declined from 42.7 percent in 1994 to 32.6 percent in 2010.

In the latest development, India ranks the third lowest in Asia & the Pacific region on Economic Participation and Opportunity according to The Global Gender Gap Index report of 2015.

In a recent study conducted, it was concluded that the job market in academics was bright because according to the study if the country aims to reach the target of providing higher education to 20% of the people by 2020, 100,000 new faculties must be recruited to fill the gap of faculties lying across the country in the Universities. However, the study suggested for the recruitment of Indian PhDs from abroad. Not to speak of the problem of reservation in the job market.

Causes behind the Gap and low participation:

Inequalities in educational enrolment, discrimination in pay/wages and types of jobs etc., are widely considered as the reasons for the restricted number of women coming out to take an active part in the labour market as per research findings given in the ILO Report, 2012.

Social factors like gender stereotypes, parental pressure, marriage etc., have also been the cause behind low participation of women in the labour force and gender inequality in higher education. Segregation in the job market is also very much effected by such gender stereotypical notions.

Many have commented that women are best suited for jobs in nursing, teaching, crafts, clerical sectors. Such stereotypes discourage women from taking up positions in other male dominated sectors like management, business etc.

Women have faced marginalisation in academia with higher number men occupying faculty positions in Universities and colleges. While women in academia in India are still struggling, the following findings have much to say about the contemporary position of women in academia, as under-represented.

In 2011, Indian women held,” While 38.5% of women in India occupy “Lecturer/Assistant Professor” faculty positions, 31.1% of “Reader and Associate Professor” faculty positions, and 25.5% held “Professor and Equivalent” faculty positions as per research findings (Morley, 2014: Morley & Crossouard, 2014).

Empowerment: Problems and Challenges:

The term “Empowerment” has varied connotation in the world of changing power dynamics and there is no fixed definition of Empowerment.

According to the World Bank, empowerment is

“the process of increasing the assets and capabilities of individuals or groups to make purposive choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes”

(The World Bank Group, 2016).

According to Nisar-ul-Haq defines empowerment as,

“a synonym for participation, for speaking out, or for meeting some need”

(Kishore, 2006)

Another noteworthy and practicable concept of empowerment has been forwarded by Naila Kabeer, who describes empowerment as

“the expansion in people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them”

(Kabeer, 1999, p. 437).

“Empowerment through research” as the topic goes, implies the transformation of the personal-self of the doctoral students throughout their journey as a PhD candidate and the above two definitions are best suited for this purpose.

Research and ODL: KKHSOU perspective

Doctoral candidates of KKHSOU are basically full time scholars. Initially, KKHSOU on the lines of IGNOU offered RTA (Research and Teaching Assistant) scheme to encourage research to acquire skills necessary for teaching, evaluation etc., and leading to PhD. The first batch of RTAs in KKHSOU composed of 3 candidates, all female. As per the RTA scheme, the scholars were paid stipend as determined by the DEC (Distance Education Council), presently Distance Education Bureau or DEB). Besides the three RTAs, there were external candidates pursuing PhD who were not paid allowances but underwent full time course work programmes as per the UGC guidelines.

Though the RTA scheme was discontinued after the third batch, yet the external candidates were continued to be enrolled in the PhD programme. As per the UGC guidelines, the PhD programme at KKHSOU and other distance mode Universities have been stopped till further notification. IGNOU has raised its voice against the step taken by UGC of discontinuing PhD through distance mode, which, according to them, goes against the idea of a “University”.

The PhD candidates of KKHSOU belong to various disciplines within the field of Social Sciences, Management, Humanities and Mass Communication.

The second convocation of KKHSOU was held recently on February 5, 2017. The total number of PhD awardees was eight, of which four were female. During the first convocation, the number of PhD awardees was three, all female.

Interestingly, the women doctoral scholars at KKHSOU are all working women.

Narratives of doctoral students:

Solo Journey:

For most of the scholars, the journey of doing research has been mainly very lonely. One of the student commented on the initial days of research,

“The initial period was very confusing and there were times of hesitation before beginning my research. The first concern was if the degree awarded by an Open University would even make a difference to my career”

The sense of “fear”, “insecurity” was found to be common among the doctoral candidates and they have mentioned it a lot many times during their conversations. Open Universities have still a long way to go in mitigating the doubts that people have in their mind regarding the degrees awarded by them.

The initial journey was never smooth for the scholars as narrated.

Guide and Supervisor Rapport:

Unlike the other doctoral candidates from traditional Universities where the candidate doesn't have a difficulty in choosing their supervisor, at KKHSOU, the candidates did comment on having to face hardship in this context. One of them said,

“I was facing a hard time to choose a supervisor for my research because the faculty strength at the University was not strong”.

Another candidate also made a comment in the same line,

“I was asked if I had a supervisor in my mind so as to work out my research project. I was unable to say so, because I had the idea that a guide would be provided to me by the University”.

Socialising:

The scholars had to undergo compulsory PhD coursework classes, which were held on weekends, Saturday and Sunday for six months before they appeared for the exam. It was during this period that they got a chance of meeting and interacting with their peers. During these hours of coursework, the candidates got a chance of interacting with their peers along with the resource persons who were basically Professors from reputed institutions or research institutes.

“The classes were very interesting and the issues of discussion were multi-disciplinary. There was immense scope for exchange of ideas and knowledge”.

However there were instances like that of one who said,

“At times, I failed to bond with my peers. I could not open up and there was hesitation to even talk confidently about my topic”.

Self-Transformation:

During the entire process of doing research, the candidates reveal that they have felt a change within them. They feel more confident and ready to take on the challenges of life. One of them commented,

“When I began my PhD, I was nervous and there were many apprehensions with regard to the credibility of my degree. Now after completion, I am more confident. I hope to avail better opportunities in my career”.

Another candidate reiterated the same,

“I have become more assured of my goals now after my PhD. The experience has been fruitful “.

However, there were exceptions to such narratives, where one of them commented,

“I have completed my PhD and working right now, but I still feel sceptical of the value that my degree holds in comparison with my peers from the traditional Universities”.

Institutional Issues:

While undergoing this entire process of research, the candidate often relies on the help and support of the institution. In case of KKHSOU, the candidates have remarked on this issue and it is interesting to note that the experience shared was mixed. One of them said,

“I had access to the library and the staffs were helpful during my entire PhD period. The courses were organised on schedule and the exams were held on time”.

Conclusion:

Making advances in the field of research and higher learning can open new avenues for women in academia. And Open and Distance Learning offers a good chance. The KKHSOU of Assam has had and continues to have more women researchers enrolled in the PhD course. The ODL provides immense scope for the women researchers to take up research and join the academia. However, on the loop side, it can only attract the intellectual minds, when the ODL system is given the much needed attention by the respective authorities in the Government bodies.

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