EQUIVALENCY PROGRAMME IN INDIA- IMPLEMENTATION THROUGH NIOS

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ABSTRACT

India is conscious of the dubious distinction of having the largest stock of illiterates in the world. We decided to face it and take up the challenge of creating a literate society by providing quality, equivalent basic education for achieving Education for All (EFA) goals. A large population, low literacy rates and lack of resources required to expand the formal education system sufficiently led to the development of Equivalency Programmes in India.

Equivalency Programme under Saakshar Bharat, MHRD, Government of India, aims to provide a second chance to those who have missed opportunities of formal education. This programme enables the neo-literates, school dropouts in the age group of 15+ to continue their learning beyond basic literacy and acquire equivalency to formal education levels. An Equivalency Programme generally focuses on deprived populations but it is fast becoming the alternative route to education for those who lack access to conventional education systems.

The National Institute of Open Schooling offers courses for the secondary and senior secondary education through the open and distance mode. It currently has a learner base of 2.78 million. It is also the certifying authority for the Basic Literacy Examination for adults conducted under the aegis of the National Literacy Mission. The Open Basic Education (OBE) programme initiated by NIOS offers continuing education to persons in 15+ age group utilizing their life experience and local knowledge systems.

The paper shall discuss the need and objectives of the Equivalency Programme in India, the present status, and mainly the challenges faced in the implementation of the Programme.

BACKGROUND

Education is a human right and is the key for human resource development. Education is essential for sustainable development, peace and stability within and with other countries. A country's progress is measured by the quality of educational improvement, adequate employment or self-employment opportunities, sustainable income, population stabilization, overall well being of each individual, etc. Many of these are measured and rated in the Human Development Index by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which places India at 130 out of 188 countries. Education is an important indicator of development as it is an investment for future and is an instrument of change.

India is conscious of the dubious distinction of having the largest stock of illiterates in the world. While addressing the issues of general education, policies were also made

for the adult illiterates to bring them into the mainstream. A large number of literacy programmes have been planned and implemented- the first one being the National Adult Literacy Programme in 1978; followed by the National Literacy Mission in 1985; and the Saakshar Bharat in 2009. These efforts have shown results when the total number of illiterates in the country was less than the total number of literates as per the Census 1991. The trend has continued in the 2001 and 2011 Census also.

Number of Literates and Illiterates from 1951- 2011

Year	No. of Literates (in millions)	No. of Illiterates (in millions)
1951	55.30	246.60
161	105.52	267.32
171	161.41	307.19
1981	235.73	305.32
1991	359.32	328.83
2001	560.75	304.15
2011	763.64	282.70

Census 2011 reveals that Literacy in India has made remarkable strides. Literacy rate of India stands at 72.99%. Overall Literacy rate has grown by 8.15 percent points in the last decade; the male literacy rate has grown by 5.63 percent points whereas female literacy rate by 10.97 percent points. Gender disparity in literacy rates declined by 5.34 percent points from 21.59 percent points in 2001 to 16.25 percent points in 2011.There has been a continuous decrease in gender gap in literacy since 1991 (24.84 percent point).

However, as per the Census 2011 the total population in the 15+ age group was 838.41 million out of which 257.58 million were illiterate. There were 79.10 million illiterates (51.40 million females and 27.70 million males) in the 15-34 age group. This age group is the most productive age group and hence need more attention in the area of education and skill development as they are the bread winners in the family.

NEED FOR EQUIVALENCY PROGRAMMES

To ensure the inclusion of all groups in education, alternative educational channels are needed in addition to the formal school system. To meet the goal of Education for All (EFA), it is necessary to provide education not only through formal education programmes, but also through non-formal education programmes to children, youth and adults who have not completed their basic education.
Equivalency Programmes (EPs) for Promoting Lifelong Learning
UNESCO Bangkok, 2006

(As cited in the foreword of UNESCO Bangkok. 2006. Equivalency Programmes (EPs) for Promoting Lifelong Learning. UNESCO Bangkok. Bangkok, Thailand.)

In 1993 UNESCO-APPEAL (Asia and Pacific Programme of Education for All) defined Equivalency Programmes (EPs) as "alternative education programmes equivalent to existing formal or vocational education". In most countries of the Asia-Pacific region, EPs encompass non-formal education (NFE), correspondence or distance education, adult education, and recreational and retirement education. The rationale for the development of Equivalency Programmes is that many countries have large populations and low literacy rates and lack the resources required to expand the formal education system sufficiently to meet the demand for education. In such a situation, an alternate system has to be found. It is necessary that any alternative education system must be on par with the formal system, i.e., the same quality of education must be provided under both systems.

According to the UNESCO Manual, Equivalency Programmes ideally have the following characteristics:
- EP courses may be different but the qualifications gained through EPs are considered equivalent to those gained through formal education programmes.
- 75 per cent of the content of EPs is equivalent to formal education but 25 per cent may be replaced by work experience.
- EPs allow the possibility of further study and work.
- EPs are "open" in terms of admission, age, place and pace.
- EP delivery may be through face-to-face learning or distance education.
- EP teachers are facilitators rather than managers of learning.

Learners who are a part of the EP are generally of two kinds: 1. Children who have dropped out of the formal school system and are re entering the educational stream or they may have never gone to school 2. Youth and adults who are school dropouts or have become literate under a national literacy programme and now want to continue/strengthen their education.

EQUIVALENCY PROGRAMME IN INDIA

The National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) offers the Open Basic Education Programme as an equivalency programme that targets children and is also offered for adults in the 15+ age group through open and distance learning methodology. Since 2002, the Government of India has recognised the Open Basic Education (OBE) Programme as a programme that is equivalent to formal schooling. The NIOS is the first and, at   present, the only institution in the country to offer programmes from primary to senior secondary levels through open schooling.

- **Target Learners/Groups**

  The OBE meets the educational needs of thus far unreached children; provides an alternative source of education for school "drop-outs"; makes a provision for those who cannot attend conventional schools for socio- economic reasons; as well as enables those who could not complete schooling to re-enter the education system.

  NIOS has two major categories of learners at the OBE level-

  (i)   Children of school going age (6-14 years) who cannot go to school or have dropped out of school for some reason

  (ii)   Young adults (15+) age group who cannot go to formal school because of their age

  Some of the reasons for such persons not going to school may be difficult geographical terrain such as hilly areas or islands; poverty- street children, urban slum people, or the need to earn a living which prevents them from attending attend regular school.

- **Levels of Equivalency Programme**

  The equivalency programme has been visualized as a multi-level programme that would enable neo-literates/school drop outs to move upwards in the education ladder. The Equivalency Programme is being offered for the following three levels:

  Level A – Equivalent to class III of the formal system – Age 15+

  Level B – Equivalent to class V of the formal system – Age 15+

  Level C – Equivalent to class VIII of the formal system – Age 18+

   The minimum duration of each level A/B/C is one year.

- **Choices and Flexibility allowed under Equivalency Programme**

  The equivalency programme offers freedom to learners to choose subjects of choice and helps to manage learning at their own time and pace. The following choices/flexibilities are offered to the learners in various components of the programme:

  - **Admission:** Learners are allowed flexibility in regard to admission, choice of place, time and pace of learning.
  - **Entry** – Eligible learners have the choice to join any level of equivalency programme.
  - **Age Limit** – Persons of the age of 15+ years are eligible for registration. There is no upper age limit for any level of the programme.
  - **Registration Validity** –Learners have the flexibility of taking the assessment test in the first cycle or according to their academic preparation. In view of the fact that the emphasis of the programme is to ensure that the learners remain

within the system rather than being pushed out due to non completion or failure, each learner is registered for a period of 5 years for each level.

- **Assessment System** – Considering the philosophy of open learning, where assessments are a means to assess the learner's mastery over a subject rather than creating a system that adds to learner's stress and tyranny, the assessments are flexible, stress free and non- threatening.
- **Subject choice** – Choice in selection of the vocational subject is offered at each level depending on the availability of these courses. Learners are encouraged to select vocational subject as per their work experience/choice.

The NIOS curriculum of Open Basic Education (OBE) for adults offers a mix of academic and vocational subjects. The learning package consists of language(s), mathematics, science and social science as academic subjects, in addition to one vocational subject. Hindi, English or the regional language is the medium of study. The OBE curriculum developed by the NIOS is competency-based. Certain key competencies have been identified in each area. A learner has to acquire proficiency in these competencies in order to qualify for a certificate. The curriculum is text-free and allows itself to be adapted to local situations. It prepares the learner to deal with   practical life situations.

Although the curriculum for adults and children is about the same, certain specific areas have been included for adults. One such area is good parenting. Since the majority of the clients are parents, subjects like responsible parenthood, reproductive health, good habits and values have been included. Another set of competencies included in the curriculum for adults relates to vocational education. The OBE prepares adults for future employment through its vocational education component. The curriculum includes vocational skills and values, such as the dignity of labour, equal wages regardless of gender, entrepreneurship and business ethics.

The flexibility in the system allows agencies to identify their own local specific vocational trades and offer these to their learners. A vocational course has the same weight as an academic subject. Some of the OBE vocational courses focus on the preservation of fruits and vegetables, health and beauty care, cutting and tailoring and basic computing. The choice of vocational subjects to be offered is decided in consultation with the accredited agency, taking into consideration local needs. More courses are added to the list according to demand.

THE EQUIVALENCY PROGRAMME UNDER SAAKSHAR BHARAT IN INDIA

Equivalency Programme designed under Saakshar Bharat covers all adults in the age group of 15 and above. It aims to provide second chance to those who have missed opportunities of formal education. This programme enables the neo-literates, school dropouts in the age group of 15+ to continue their learning beyond basic literacy and

acquire equivalency to formal education levels. The Saakshar Bharat Scheme imparts functional literacy to neo-literate adults that is, self reliance in Reading, Writing and Arithmetic (Numeracy).

The Adult Literacy rate (15+ Age Group) is the percentage of population 15-24 years old who can both read and write with understanding a short simple statement on everyday life. The adult literacy rate has shown an upward trend for females as well as males. It has increased from 61% to 69.3% during the period 2001-2011. As per NSS 71st round findings, Adult Literacy rate stands 70.5% for year 2014.
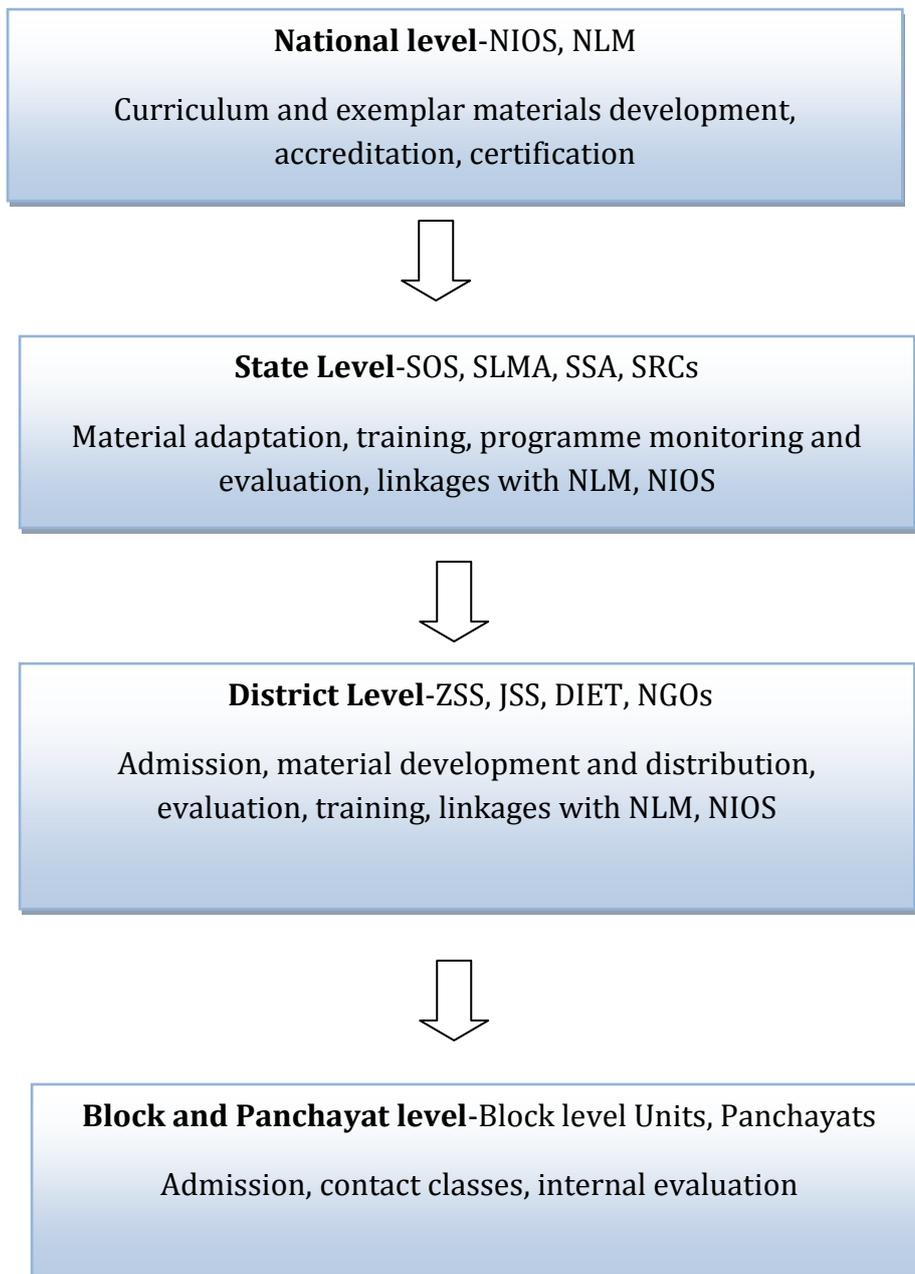
The National Literacy Mission Authority (NLMA) provisions for the development of literacy in adults and conducts the assessment of neo-literates in two phases every year i.e in August and March. So far, 12 phases of assessment have been carried out ever since the inception of the assessment in August 2010. A total number of 65.52 million learners appeared in these assessments. Out of them, 48.09 million candidates have been declared successful and certified. NIOS has been designated the Nodal agency by NLMA for assessment and certification. The concern now is to provision for the continuing education for these 48 million adults who have gained functional literacy, to prevent a relapse into illiteracy.

Faced with the gigantic task of educating such a large number of youth in the country, the Govt. of India added a fresh dimension to the EP being run by NIOS- of registering the neo-literates at level A of the EP. Under a Pilot Project 32 locations across the country have been selected for running the EP where efforts would be made to enroll the graduates of the Basic Literacy Exam at the A level of OBE. These locations cover almost all the States in India and have a registration of nearly 21,000 this year. Since the thrust of the Saakshar Bharat Programme is on the education of women, this is borne out by the registration figures where females constitute about 75 % of the total enrolment.

Implementation of the EP

The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) at the centre has decided on the implementation strategy for the EP through the active involvement of the central, state, district/local agencies. The implementation of the equivalency programme is carried out with the help of national, state and district-level government and non-governmental organisations. No separate organisational structures have been set up for the equivalency programme. These are accredited to the NIOS as accredited agencies (AAs).The role of the AAs is to provide academic and other guidance to learners. The study centres for the EP are the Adult Education Centres (AECs). The AECs are responsible for conducting the educational activities.

Implementation Structure of OBE

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│          National level-NIOS, NLM            │
│                                              │
│   Curriculum and exemplar materials          │
│   development, accreditation, certification  │
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│       State Level-SOS, SLMA, SSA, SRCs       │
│                                              │
│   Material adaptation, training, programme   │
│   monitoring and evaluation, linkages with   │
│   NLM, NIOS                                   │
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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│     District Level-ZSS, JSS, DIET, NGOs      │
│                                              │
│   Admission, material development and        │
│   distribution, evaluation, training,        │
│   linkages with NLM, NIOS                    │
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│  Block and Panchayat level-Block level       │
│  Units, Panchayats                           │
│                                              │
│   Admission, contact classes, internal       │
│   evaluation                                 │
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There is a great deal of resource sharing in all areas. The National Institute of Open Schooling organises training programmes for lesson writers and evaluators; the State Literacy Mission Authority organises training to ensure effective implementation of the programme and the State Resource Centre designs and conducts training programmes for different levels of functionaries, including preraks/facilitators and district officials. The prerak/facilitator (Prerak from the root 'prerna' meaning inspiration) is the functionary at the grassroots level for the EP.

APPROACH TO DELIVERY OF EP

The OBE programme of NIOS that has been specially designed keeping in mind that almost all the learners are either coming back to education after a gap or those who have never been to a formal school merges seamlessly with the EP. These features are -

1. Learner Centred – The learners' needs are the focal point. They have to be taught how to become self learners and gain control over their learning. The format of the EP is designed so that learners can decide what to learn and how to learn, with guidance from the facilitators in this difficult process.

2. Flexibility–The programme has multiple entry and exit points and learners can join it depending upon their level of prior learning. In the Open Basic Education Programme, learners have an integrated package of both academic and vocational subjects

3. Interactivity- The delivery mechanism is a combination of face to face interaction and self study. In many cases the learners are only part time students- many are working while others may have limited time for studying. However the personal contact through face to face sessions with activities that engage the interest of the learners such as "Hands On" or group activities is an essential part of the programme. The facilitator can form tutorial groups which are small in size so that learners can solve their difficulties easily.

4. Recognition of prior learning – Another important aspect of EP is the recognition of knowledge and skills that a learner may have been obtained through some other system. This is an important feature when learning materials are developed for adult learners or vocational courses are designed as per the local need for specific skill sets.

CHALLENGES FACED

Adult learners encounter many difficulties in their learning as a result of diverse responsibilities associated with adult life. Studying in adult life is often a difficult process with pains and disappointments. Some of the major challenges faced in the implementation of this equivalency programme in India are-

1. Motivation- many learners have given up studying a long time ago and to bring them back to their books is a herculean task. They need to be motivated not only to join the programme but also to sustain through it. The adults have to be convinced of the value of their learning and to make space in their daily schedule for it to happen.

2. Poor reading skills- since the learners have lost touch with studying, their reading skills are poor leading them to read a sentence many times instead of just scanning through it. This learning difficulty or poor performance can cause them to drop out.

3. Employability concerns- Young learners in the 18-25 age group are looking for employment opportunities to acquire or enhance their earning capability. Hence some amount of skill training along with academic education is a must for this group to continue in the equivalency programme.

4. Class timing- some adult learners cannot attend their classes because the time of the class is not suitable to the learners due to their responsibilities at home and/or work. Although attempts are generally made to accommodate as many as possible.

5. Low honorarium- the 'prerak' or the facilitator works with the adults at the grassroots level- these are generally retired teachers, unemployed young persons or sometimes even the teacher at the local school. The low stipend paid to them is insufficient to ensure high degree of commitment towards their task. Those who do, do it out of a sense of commitment to their society.

6. Training of functionaries- training of preraks is initially done by the State govt. but ongoing training or refresher training that is extremely important to the success of the programme, is often not imparted.

7. Environment creation- media attention to the programme is crucial for its success- there is insufficient reporting in the media both about the programme and about its successes.

CONCLUSION

A nation that is literate is one where its citizens are empowered to ask questions, seek information take decisions, have equal access to education, health, livelihood and can participate in shaping their future. Ensuring the education of its adult population is the need of the hour for India. The equivalency programme is one of the largest social initiatives in the world, involving the relentless passion and commitment of scores of people and orgnisations. However, the country still faces grave challenges in achieving total literacy and lifelong learning.

An attempt to address the challenges in the implementation of the equivalency programme shall go a long way in ensuring its success. For India to project itself as a world power, it is imperative to adopt a professional approach with whole hearted efforts towards the implementation of the Equivalency Programme. The National Institute of Open Schooling is committed to its role of developing need based courses for the EP, training of functionaries, and assessment and certification of the learners.

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