Inclusive approach to higher education: Analysing MOOC'S as the vehicle for bridging gaps through digital platforms

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Abstract: *In this paper, we have explored the advantages and challenges of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in emerging economies and developing societies like India. MOOCs are a relatively new phenomenon sweeping higher education. Less than five years ago, MOOC was just an idea, but currently there seems to be a robust market for these courses and India is opening up to many massive open online course providers like Coursera. Given India's need for reaching out to the largest possible number of learners, MOOCs are seen by some as the hi-tech engine of a transformative revolution that will remake education as a highly engaging, open and low cost activity, whereas the sceptics decries the hype surrounding MOOCs and claim that their benefits are illusory. We have discussed the MOOC trend in India and its difference with the other online and open education programs. The survey conducted for the study indicates that MOOC is indeed catching the attention of graduate and post graduate urban students of Delhi but as of now, failing to grab the students of rural Delhi. While the concept of self-paced study, inherent to the MOOC has been appreciated by the learners, the study concludes that these courses are yet to make the education free from gender, class and economic divide.*

Keywords: *MOOC, Inclusive Education, Digital Platforms for education, higher education and development, online education*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Higher Education in India is going through a transformative phase with digital pedagogy and platforms enabling the students and faculty to share and learn from the collaborative resources. It is also one of the major aspects that govern the development of a nation. With the higher education scenario getting more complex with the variety of courses and universities enabling the students to make a choice, the digital platforms of education have taken this to one step further by reaching the students at their own comfort and space. Because of digital proliferation, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) is gaining their popularity amongst the students. While the traditional programs and courses offered in India are rigidly controlled and governed by the ordinances of the universities, MOOCs offer the non-conventional, open and dis-intermediated form of learning for the students. MOOCs are also referred as the most crucial developments in the trans-national education. It is therefore vital to discuss the advantages and challenges of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in emerging economies and developing societies like India.

2. OPEN AND NETWORKED LEARNING :

> *"Students do not learn much just sitting in classes listening to teachers, memorizing pre-packaged assignments, and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write reflectively about it, relate it to past experiences, and apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves."* -Arthur W. Chickering and Stephen C. Ehrmann

When a keen learner wants to know about something, there are multiple options available with him/her. One can ask someone, buy a book, try figure it out oneself or call a school. And if that school offers a course in a thing one is trying to figure out, one can go there and take it and get access about the desired information. One might also find others who could be interested in learning that too. And if the learner belongs to the digital generation, one can always 'search online'.

During the course 'Connectivism and Connective Knowledge (CCK)' that aimed at understanding the connectivist understanding of educational systems of the future, Dave Cormier, from the University of Prince Edward Island (Canada) coined the term MOOC (Massive Open Online Course). CCK, which was led by George Siemens of Athabasca University (Canada) and Stephen Downes of the National Research Council (Canada), consisted of 25 tuition-paying students in Extended Education at the University of Manitoba, Canada, as well as over 2200 online students from the general public who paid nothing.

In the Internet age, a person who is eager to learn should have the opportunity to learn, at least online. MOOC is build for a world where information is everywhere, where the social network obsessed with what you are, is a click away, where internet gives you access to a staggering amount of information. MOOC is a way of learning in a network society. It is open, participatory, distributed and supports lifelong networked learning. MOOC is an online course, but it is not a school, it is a way to connect and collaborate while developing digital skills, a way of engaging in a digital process. It can also be referred to as an Event, where people who are interested about something come together, work and deliberate on it in a structured way. Since the coursework is open, it gives chance to people to read, reflect and comment upon. One can even participate in the course without paying because one needs to pay only to get the credit from the institution not for the learning. There is no single path to the course from start to the end, and this allows for the creative negotiation by the participants and the sharing of newer approaches for learning. It helps create a distributed knowledge base that goes on to lifelong learning. One can chose what one wants to do, how one wants to participate, and one only decides at the end if one is successful.

MOOCs can provide an easy, open and networked learning for not only the students from formal university set ups but can be beneficial to the learners who are keen to gain knowledge without the burden of getting certified. So, in a MOOC, the academic content of the course is made available free to the student. The course content is delivered online through text books, videos, and interactive forums. There no limit to the number of participants and while it is not necessary for a student of MOOC to be graded, most MOOC platforms offer that as an optional extra.

3. THE INDIAN PERSPECTIVE:

Indian students have crossed borders for variety of courses and specialised trainings in the traditional setup. For MOOCs also, Indian students have shown keen interest in courses provided by both Western countries and home universities. Raj Chakrabarti, professor of systems engineering in Carnegie Mellon University feels, “Given the limited capacity of seats at top US and Indian universities, these courses enhance the competitive edge of Indian students in the global job market and improves their chances of admission to top US and European colleges and graduate schools."

However, there is still a majority of courses being provided by the western universities only and they face challenges in engaging the students from developing world due to the lack of content in Indic languages. Apart from the language, majority of case studies and the examples used in such courses are from Western countries that lack cultural understanding on the part of students from developing nations.

The number of MOOCs provided by players like Coursera, Udacity, edX, Miriadax and FutureLearn has exploded in recent years. The participation by Indians has been overwhelming in the major platforms such as Coursera, edX and Udacity. As Coursera, a major player in the MOOC sector gets second highest enrolments from India after United States, we can say that MOOCs have a long way to go in India especially if there are courses on unexplored topics like Indian Music and arts, Yoga, Meditation and Ayurveda. In a system that is rigidly accustomed to the rules of teaching and evaluation where even the question paper has almost always a fixed pattern asking the students to attempt 4 out of 7 long answer type questions, MOOCs are a welcome change. Also, with the University Grants Commission of India, UGC implementing the Choice Based Credit System (CBCS) in undergraduate courses, MOOCs can provide a great learning platform to implement the same. Choice Based Credit System (CBCS) allows the students to have a choice from the prescribed courses and they can learn at their own pace. This very premise is common with that of MOOCs that allows the learners to choose the type of the course, content they want to share and network through as also the assessment pattern and strategy.

However, in India, a large number of students still pursue courses and opt for universities with an end result of employability with a high pay package. It is therefore vital to understand if the home universities are able to fulfil the job requirements of the learners through MOOCs.

4. ONLINE MEDIA COURSES :

Though Indian journalism and mass communication education is six decade old, but it has yet to take an appropriate shape. It is fraught with quality and quantity challenges: There is a shortage of quality teachers, an enabling environment for students and infrastructure, just to point out a few. These hurdles are not going to go away soon even though there is a surge in the number of students at all levels and an increasing demand for quality media education. There is also a corresponding demand from industry for skilled human resource. The thirst and demand for quality education and trained personnel will not be easy to quench because it takes time, funds and quality human resource to set up good institutions. Although, institutes such as the Asian College of Journalism, Indian Institute of Mass Communication, Indian Institute of Journalism and New Media, Xavier Institute of Communication have industry focused diploma programmes, still at the university level, it is felt that there is a need to reorient the journalism education scenario to the changing media trends.

Another problem besetting the media education in India is that majority of the Indian universities running media courses are located in metros/cities and the journalism and communication courses offered by them do not

emphasize on education or training necessary for a student to be a rural communicator. Also, most of the students, after completion of the course and because of aptitude and appropriate training for working as a communicator in urban areas, prefer placement in cities and towns where mass media establishments are located. The lack of rural communication-oriented education and training methods in journalism schools, and limited opportunities for rural communication practitioners have prevented them from making their profession as a social engineer in the society.

In such a scenario, MOOCs can play a pivotal role for students residing in remote areas who do not have adequate access to skill enhancement and quality learning. MOOCs can especially be beneficial for those who are bound by financial instability, physical limitations or commuting issues. Popular MOOC platform Coursera runs a media course, 'What is News?' which has been created by Michigan State University This course guides through the basic elements of professional journalism and the news values and ethics of covering real-world issues and events. The overview and examples of the types of news coverage helps introduce the different types of journalism, such as social media, multimedia, print, visual and broadcast, and how professional journalists effectively use each format. The same provider also offers a course in basic journalism named 'Journalism Skills for Engaged Citizens' created by the University of Melbourne, for citizens who are using new media to publish news, views and information. It covers writing skills, interviews, ethics, law and accessing public forums and documents. It also introduces basic investigative skills.

Another popular online learning portal which has recently been prescribed as a suggested e-resource by the Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, New Delhi, for its under graduate media students is VideoMaker an application for creating video from Images and Music, Its totally free and be forever without any watermark Online version of its monthly magazine covers the use of camcorders, desktop video, editing, lighting, and audio production for novice and expert videographers. In fact, according to the Vision Paper of the Higher Education Committee of FICCI titled 'MOOCs and the Future of Indian Higher Education', the response of Indian students towards MOOCs is positive and they stand second in the world in terms of enrolling to MOOCs. Undoubtedly, there is an increasing interest among Indian students in MOOCs to obtain quality education. This also resulted in the launch of a MOOC platform called the SWAYAM (Study Webs of Active Learning for Young Aspiring Minds) by the ministry of human resource development.

Some of India's leading telecom operators recently slashed their mobile data rates. Such developments can fall in favour with students. While 3G is becoming common and 4G affordable by the day, the expansion of High-speed internet connectivity will prove to be a boon for online education. Moreover, Digital India will encourage large amounts of educational content to be accessed easily in gram panchayats across the country. Without a second thought, MOOCs are one of the most viable platforms for transforming the media educational scenario in the country, especially in semi-urban and rural areas.

5. LEARNERS' PERSPECTIVE :

One of the objectives of this paper is to find out the perspective of students of Delhi towards the MOOCs. For that, we conducted a survey of students of Delhi enrolled in any of the MOOC course with any of the major platform provider like Coursera, edX and Udacity. Eligible respondents were students who had enrolled and watched at least one lecture for one of the online courses. The students were contacted only once with a brief e-mail message asking them to complete a web survey. The method of snowball sampling was used to make the sample representative. The survey consisted of 12 questions relating to the respondent's demographic information, history and experience with MOOCs, and reasons for taking MOOC courses.

The survey has clearly emphasised the value of self- paced learning. 85% of the surveyed students were of the opinion that the major advantage of the MOOC over a traditional lecture-based course is its greater flexibility, customization, and accessibility, which students saw as encouraging structured, self-paced learning. Students valued the flexibility offered through the MOOC, which allowed for them to watch the weekly video lectures at their own pace and on their own schedule.

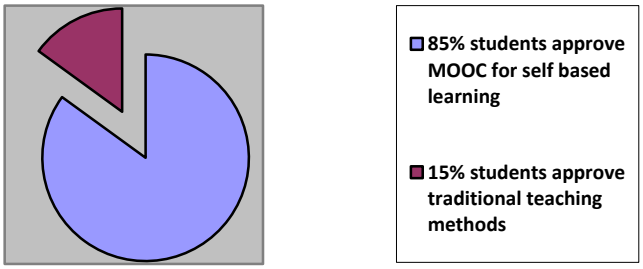

Fig.1 students selection of self learning

As per the findings of our survey, students who have participated in MOOCs thus far appear to be predominantly highly educated and employed, and looking in gender terms, there are more men than women who have opted for these courses. They also appear to be drawn in large numbers to the platform in hopes of using the knowledge they acquire to advance in their current jobs.

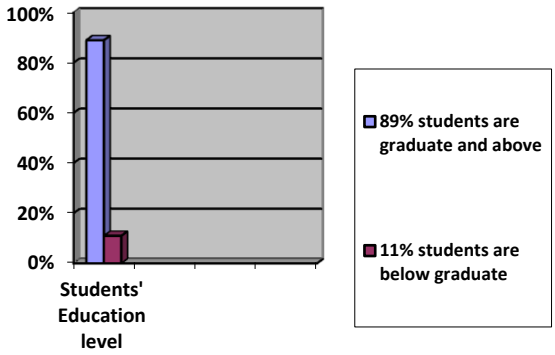

Fig.2 students education level

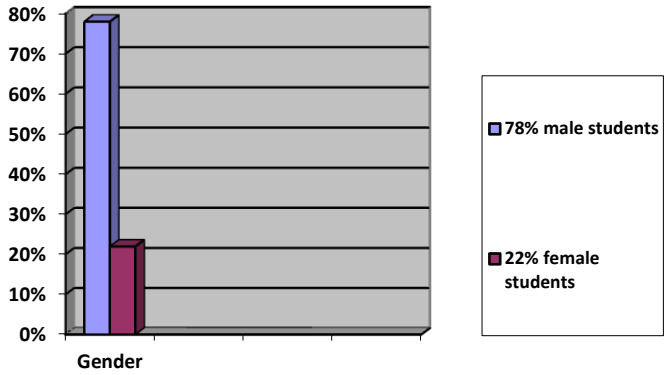

Fig.3 Gender wise

The education level of MOOCs students stand in stark contrast to the educational distributions of the populations as majority of the enrolled students were under graduates and post graduates. While one may expect that students participating in MOOCs would be somewhat more likely to exhibit higher levels of education than the population writ large, the extent of this divide is greater than one might reasonably expect. The findings of this study indicate that MOOCs have still to reach in high numbers to the less educated individuals in the rural villages of Delhi. Despite the optimistic and aspirational declarations of many MOOC providers, these courses are not, as of yet, making education "gender-blind, class-blind, and bank account-blind." MOOCs have potential to someday mitigate some of the world's educational disparities by expanding access to high-quality education, but the early adopters of the MOOC phenomenon are those who have already attained the highest levels of education.

The survey also indicates a significant number of drop outs after the first week of enrolment due to falling of motivation and interest. However, the problem of student retention is not pertaining only to MOOCs. The traditional picture of educational levels—like a pyramid with a very wide base (of illiterates) tapering to a sharp point (of graduates)—is changing at the bottom but not much at the top. The proportion of those who are illiterate or have studied just up to primary levels is going down but beyond that the pyramid continues to be sharply pointed. A countrywide education survey carried out by the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) has found that although the rate of attendance in the 20-24 age group (corresponding to graduation and above) has recorded the highest rates of growth in several decades, However, worryingly, the dropout rate has also kept pace.

6. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS:

Undeniably, there is tremendous hope for this educational platform, but the individuals without resources and access to higher education whom MOOC revolution is supposed to help the most are underrepresented among the early adopters. MOOCs can be of vital importance for learners in India who are restricted by financial instability and those who have limitations of commuting. With the Union Budget Fiscal Year 2017 focusing on providing entrepreneurship, education and training in 2,200 colleges, 500 government industrial training institutes, 300 schools and 50 vocational training centres via MOOCs, we can clearly see the focus of the government in launching digital literacy schemes and reaching out to the rural households. MOOCs make sense with digital libraries which can support learning by playing a significant part in blending the MOOC-specific platform with learning resources The popularity of campaigns like #digitalindia and #elearning are a testimony to the same.

Since India has emerged as the second largest market for smartphones in the world, the inclusion of mobile phone platforms into MOOC system would benefit potential online learners. But, there needs to be some engagement between the telecom operators and Mobile/internet app companies to develop robust and workable framework which shall significantly enhance access and penetration of MOCCs in developing country like India. For this, special focus should be made on the inclusion of Indic language programming that is culturally relevant and negotiable to the large number of learners from rural and semi-rural areas.

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