OPEN SCHOOLING IN INDIA: A CHALLENGE TO TECHNOLOGIES FOR LEARNING AND TRAINING

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Introduction

In India technological development is at varying stages. On the one hand one can find the bullock carts still operating in the countryside and at the same time the country has the requisite space technology of the highest order. In the field of education too there are schools without buildings(13.50% at the primary level) and blackboards on the one hand and there are fully air-conditioned schools with all the teaching learning technologies at their command. Use of media for imparting curricular education is being made as a mode of distance education. Interactive video mode has also been experimented with for reaching the large numbers of teachers for capacity building. Virtual classrooms are being planned.

The geographical terrain varies from arid regions of Rajasthan with Thar deserts to snow clad regions of the Himalayas, lush green areas, with highest rainfall in the world, tropical rain forests, one of the most polluted city in the world, very sparsely populated areas in the hilly terrain, one of the largest coast lines, more than seventy million tribal populations, more than a thousand dialects used as mother tongue, more than seventy percent of the approx. one billion population living in villages with very limited infrastructure facilities The challenge of relevance of the curriculum has been causing severe problems.. It has been one of the major problem the country is trying to solve in this multi- cultural and multi- ethnic society that India has. The multiplicity of languages spoken and the environmental variety, multiply the problems of curriculum and material development, teaching learning processes etc.

The out of school population in the relevant age group is of the dimension of about 200 millions. The formal schools have about 100 millions enrolment. The existing number of schools according to the Fifth All India Educational survey was735, 785, which is just not sufficient to cater to the needs of the out of school populations. The Open schooling therefore is not only desirable but also an indispensable

National Open School (NOS)

The National Open School was established in November 1989 with a mission of providing 'education for all', 'greater equity and justice in the society', and 'the evolution of a Learning Society'.The objectives of the NOS were stated as follows:

- To provide opportunities for continuing and developmental education to interested learners through courses and programs of general education life enrichment modules and vocational courses up to pre degree level,
- To provide consultancy services and to engage in model building in close collaboration with states and variety of other agencies or institutions,
- To serve as an agency for effective dissemination of information related to distance education and open learning,
- To identify and promote standards of learning in distance education systems and open schools which may be set up in different parts of the country, through research and evaluation and to maintain standards of equivalence with the formal system, while keeping its own distinct character

It is the largest open schooling system in the World. Its client groups include the girls, the women, the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes, the rural people, the urban poor, the unemployed, the partby employed, the under employed, the young and the adult, the partially handicapped etc. The NOS has more than 1000 study centers located in the territory of India and it also has five centers outside the country. The cumulative enrolment of the student exceeds over half a million. The annual enrolment trend shows a steady growth and in the current year the enrolment at secondary and senior secondary level alone is expected over 150 thousand.
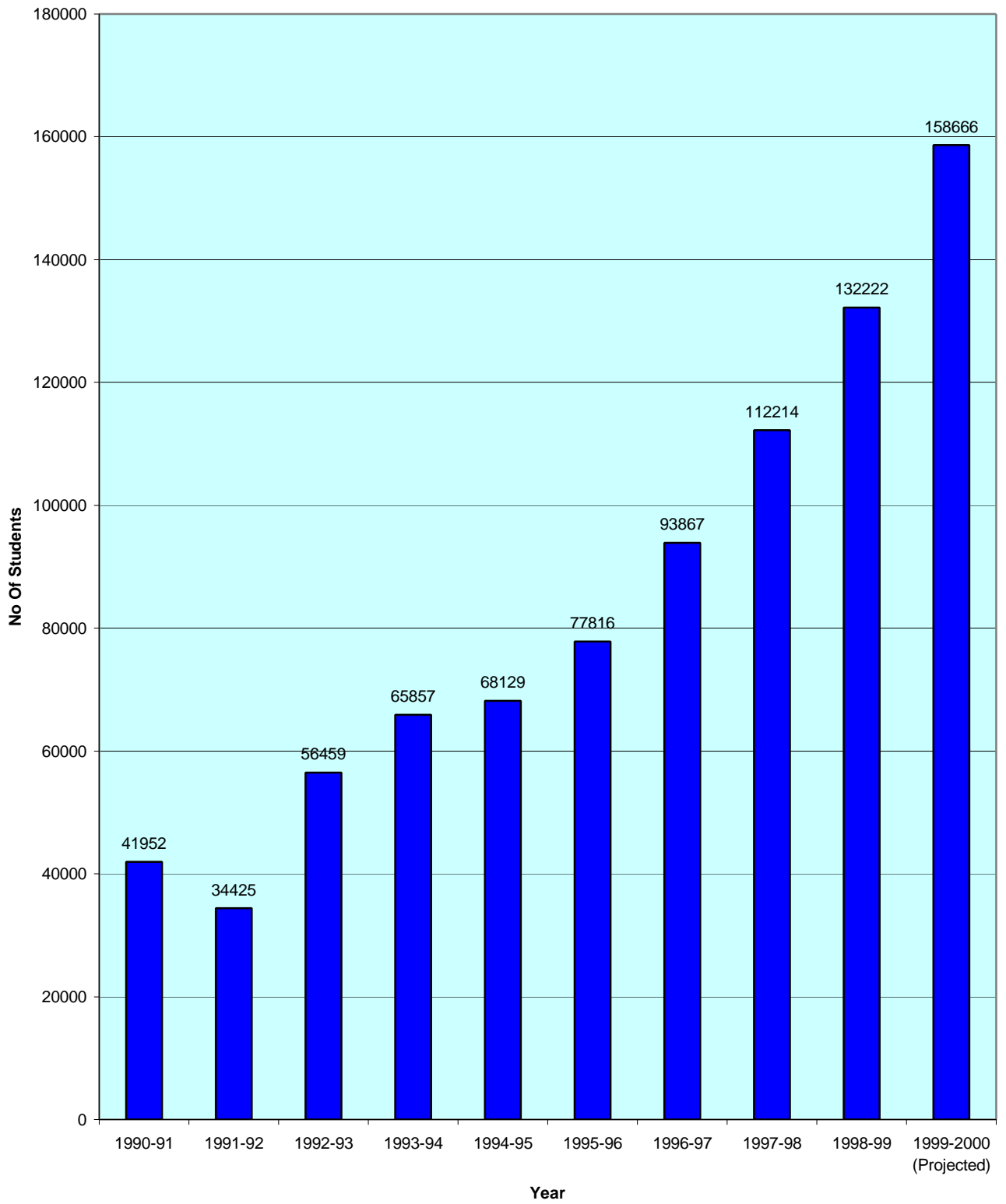
ANNUAL ENROLMENT TREND IN NOS
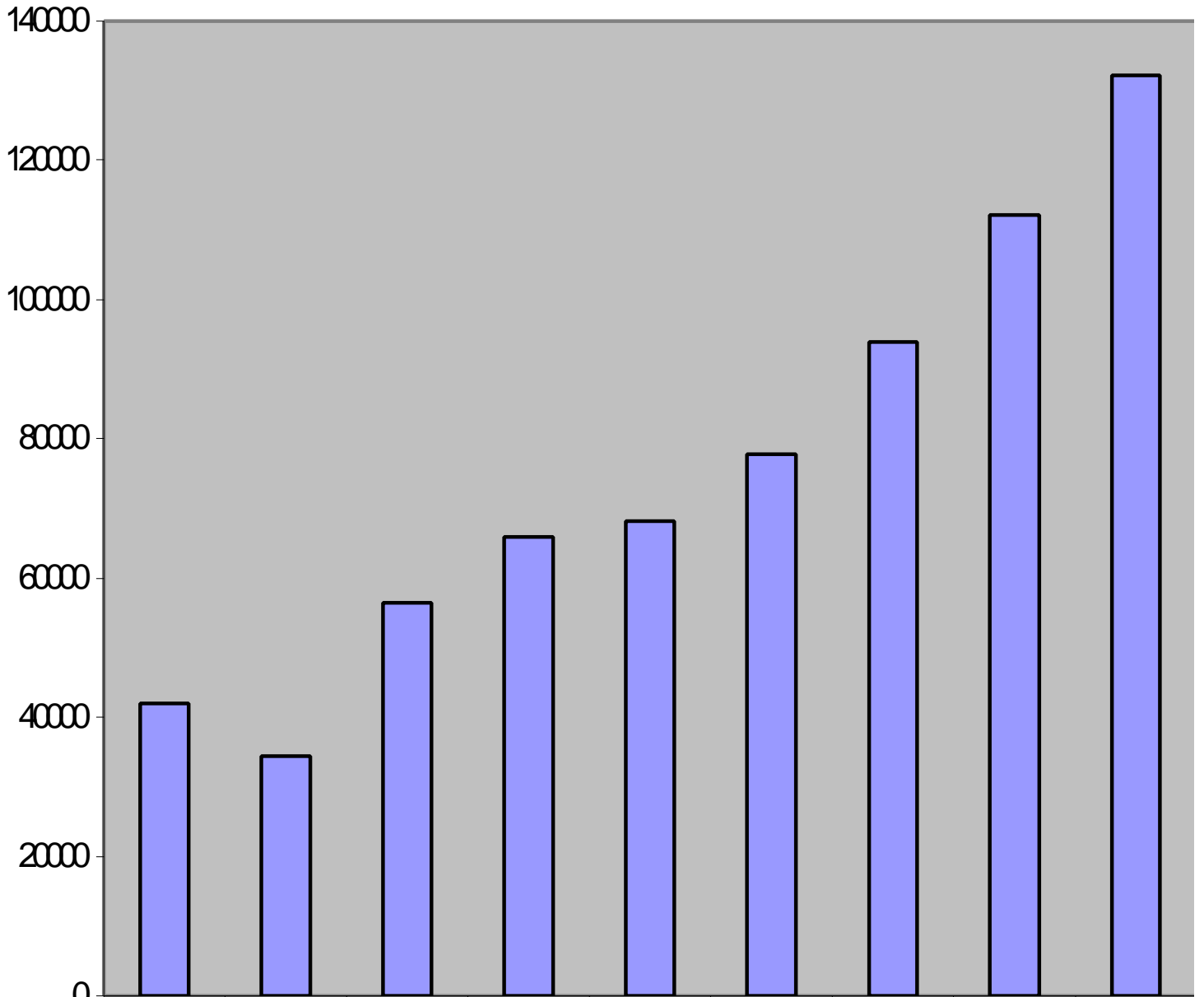
	1990-91	1991-92	1992-93	1993-94	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97	1997-98	1998-99
ENROLLMENT	41952	34425	56459	65857	68129	77816	93867	112214	132222

YEAR

Annual Enrolment Trend Since 1990

No Of Students

Year	No Of Students
1990-91	41952
1991-92	34425
1992-93	56459
1993-94	65857
1994-95	68129
1995-96	77816
1996-97	93867
1997-98	112214
1998-99	132222
1999-2000 (Projected)	158666

Year

The NOS runs programs at the elementary, secondary and senior secondary levels in academic and vocational streams. The courses are taken as a part of the requirement of certification or even as 'stand alone' courses. The vocational courses are often taken as stand alone courses. These range from cutting and tailoring to computer applications. Again, the NOS run various life enrichment programs intended particularly towards improving the quality of life. These learners are reached through the Accredited Institutions (AI s) or Accredited Vocational Institutions(AVI s) where the contact programs are held.

NATIONAL OPEN SCHOOL OUTREACH
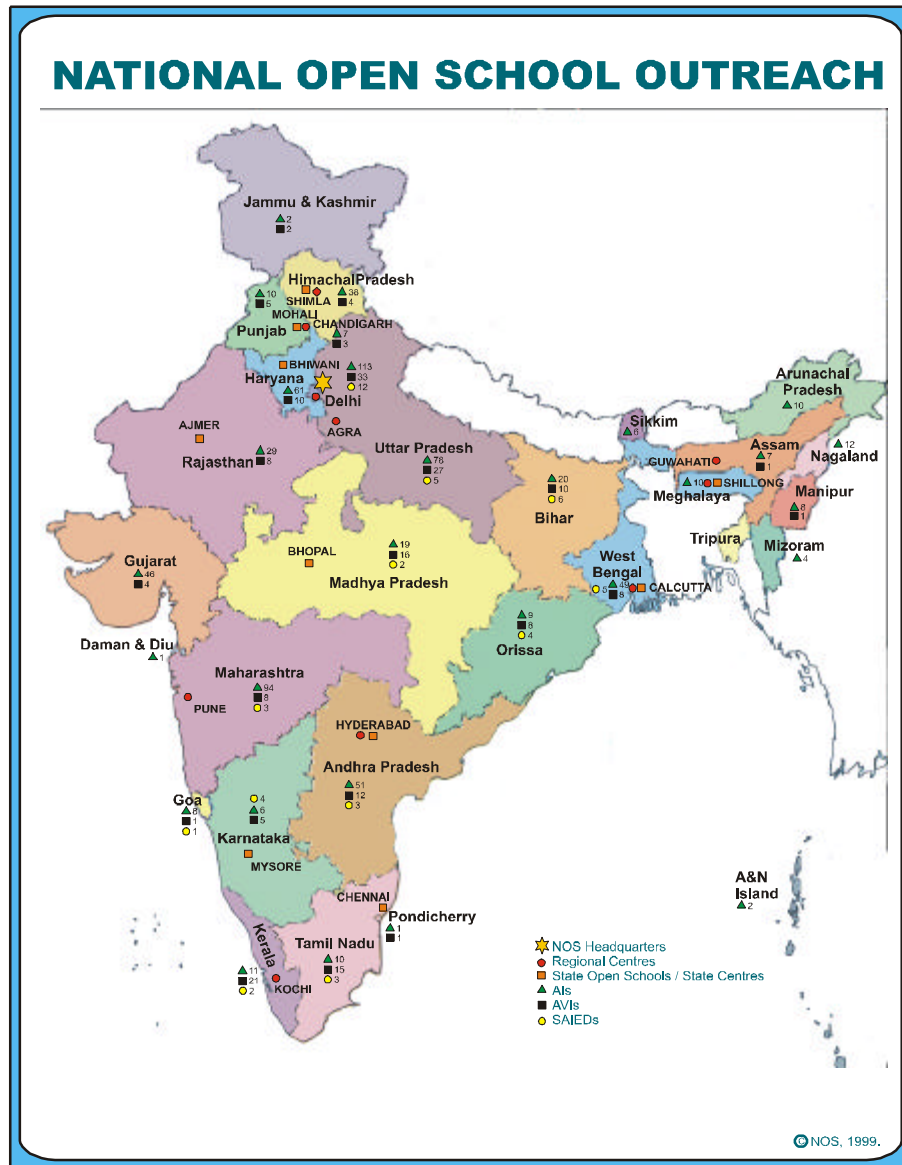
The contact programs are primarily related to the teaching of the courses and conduct of the practical . There are some major lacunae in the transaction of these teaching learning strategies which is a cause of concern to the NOS.

The problems

The problems that we face are with regard to reaching the unreached in the nook and corner of the country. The access of these unreached to the media is a question mark. While the television is the most effective media to reach them, its logistics are fraught with problems that are not generally appreciated in very many countries. For instance the power shortage in the town and villages is chronic problem. Many a times it is just not available for days together. The Internet facilities are purely urban phenomena and are not available to the type of clientele that we seek to reach.

 The best bet so far is to depend on the print media and we depend on the newspaper, both national and local, English, Hindi and local languages to reach our messages. Then we depend almost entirely on the print media to impart our courses, which again are distributed through our AI s. AI s being strategically located from the point of view of reach and infrastructure facilities become the hub for contact and reaching these learners.

We have not reached a stage of media development where we could reach our learners individually through Internet or Internet chatting. Therefore, we have to work in two stages. First, building and updating the capacities at the National level through our Human Resource development at the NOS level building the capacity at the Contact Center level. The first is rather easy because of availability of expertise and technology at the national level, while at the second level i.e. at the AI level, the logistics of reaching them is problematic. Any cascade model of training has its own inherent shortcoming. The transfer loss in such a training model is of no mean magnitude.

In order to reach these AIs we have tried the video-conferencing technology with two way audio and one way video technique. Due to limited down linking facilities this has remained an experimental exercise and has not been used as a normal and regular mode of interaction. So far, we have to reach the AI s in advance through mail to intimate them of the program, arrange for their assembly at the appointed day and time at a place where the video conferencing and Subscriber Trunk Dialing (STD) facilities are available and then make them participate in the process. It also involves, though only at the initial stages, removal of the inhibitions and fear of the advanced technology.

The current approach

Largely we are dependent on the written materials. We announce our programs through the press, issue guidelines to the AIs through letters, booklets and circulars. Admission and examination matters are handled at the AI level. We used the video conferencing for the training of the AI personnel, mainly coordinators, on an experimental basis just last year and propose to undertake this year also. But we have to depend on the facilities available at other sister institution. The contents and time of such conferencing is under revision and the tutors at the AI s are also proposed to be included. We are working towards including the pedagogy of how to anticipate and diagnose the learning knots of the individual learner and how to solve them. Individualized instruction will be given center stage in the teaching learning methodology. In other words, diagnostic and remedial approach coupled with individualized learning would be the package to be transacted through this mode.

With the dedicated education satellite coming into operation recently we are producing video lessons to be telecast for the benefit of the learners directly, provided, of course, the learners have access to it. These telecast are in the morning with a repeat in the evening. It can be seen that we are working at different levels and using appropriate technology to deliver our lessons and achieving our mission.

The future directions

The NOS has a plan of extensive use of technology in the coming years. It is at work to develop parallel test items for each level of examination conducted by it. These items will be fed into the computer and it will be possible to generate innumerable sets of parallel tests. Necessary software will be developed for this purpose. Thus with the available technology it may be possible for us to reach a stage of 'examination on demand' without the fear of copying or mass copying plaguing the examination system currently. Similarly a situation of admission on demand is also envisaged.

Taking into account the fact that India is a multilingual society with pluralistic culture, it is necessary that the entire education should be locally relevant. The need for decentralization is of utmost importance. The NOS is moving towards this goal by having ten regional offices (it already has eight). These eight regional offices are connected through fax but soon will have Internet facilities. Thus we may obviate the need of wide area networking. Then these regional centers will be working as extended outreach stations of the NOS for the AI s

Decentralization, therefore, is the prime need of this country, particularly because of its size, variety of its culture, flora and fauna. Contextually, the issue of the relevance has been at a discount for quite a long time and has created certain aberration in Indian education. This needs to be corrected by allowing greater flexibility in curriculum development and implementation. Even the States in India are too big a unit for that matter. The promotion of establishment of the State Open Schools is one of the priority areas of concern to the NOS.

The remaining challenge

The challenge that remains, and will continue to remain, is how to reach the child in remote rural and tribal areas directly? Because of uneven development in almost all spheres we have to operate with different types of technologies suitable for various techno-economic development level of the community concerned. A complete paradigm shift to fully utilize the electronic media is, at the moment not possible. Thus a drastic shift from one mode of technology to the other is neither possible nor desirable.

Reference:

N.C.E.R.T.(1989) Fifth All India Education Survey-Selected Statistics, New Delhi. Pp 4-5