Prof. G. RAM REDDY MEMORIAL LECTURE 2025



Re-envisioning Indian Open Universities in the Era of NEP 2020

By

Prof. Rajendra Prasad Das

Vice Chancellor

Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University,

Guwahati, Assam

Organised by

Prof. G. Ram Reddy Centre for Research & Development (GRCR&D)

Dr.B.R. Ambedkar Open University,

Prof.G.Ram Reddy Marg, Road No. 46, Jubilee Hills, Hyderabad (TS) 500 033

About Dr. BRAOU

The University, initially known as Andhra Pradesh Open University, was set up on 26th August 1982 through an Act of the A.P.State Legislature (APOU Act 1982). Subsequently the University was renamed as Dr.B.R.Ambedkar Open University on 26th October, 1991. The establishment of this University, the first of its kind in India, heralded an era of affirmative action on the part of the Government to provide opportunities of higher education to all sections of the society to meet the changing individual and social needs. The University is providing services to the student community through a wide network of 104 study centres spread across Telangana state including 10 Regional Co-ordination centres and 6 centres exclusively meant for women learners. Prison inmates serving life sentence also enroll themselves to pursue education through exclusive study centres at Central Prison - Cherlapally, Warangal and an exclusive Study Centre for Army personnel and their family members is established at AOC, Secunderabad. The University offers UG, PG, Diploma, Certificate and Ph.D. programmes including Professional Programmes, paving the way for life long learning.

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Respected Prof. Ghanta Chakrapani, Hon'ble Vice Chancellor, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Open University, Hyderabad; respected Mrs. G. Ram Reddy; respected Prof. V. S. Prasad, Prof. Haragopal, Prof. K. S. Rao, Prof. E. Sudha Rani, Director, GRCR&D and all the esteemed former Vice Chancellors of this historic institution; Hon'ble Vice Chancellor of IGNOU, Madam Uma Kanjhi Lal; Registrar, distinguished Directors, Faculty Members, learned academics, valued staff members and learners present here and connected from various regional centres, and friends from the media.

I stand before you today with a deep sense of humility and profound honour. I feel deeply honoured to be invited to deliver the Prof. G. Ram Reddy Memorial Lecture on the occasion of his 96th Birth Day. BRAOU as the first Open University of our country is not only merely an academic privilege for us; but it is a moment of personal inspiration and motivation for each one of us present in this celebration. This University had the privilege to be shaped and envisioned by the towering educational statesman Prof. G. Ram Reddy, the founder of India's distance education movement with his extraordinary foresight and courage. His dual legacy as the founding Vice Chancellor of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Open University and later on IGNOU has crafted the very architecture of open

learning in India. Born in a Farmers family on 4th December, 1924, in a remote village of Karimnagar district of Telangana State, he had his higher education in Osmania University and London School of Economics. He established, shaped and nurtured many institutions of higher learning.

His leadership of Osmania University, the UGC, ICSSR, and the establishment of NAAC represent a timeline of transforming Indian higher education from conventional models to flexible, modern, and quality-oriented frameworks.

Prof. Reddy exemplified humility, transparency, and a rare capacity to bring people together. His imprint remains so enduring that those who hold these positions today still work within the architecture he created. Prof. Reddy was not only a visionary and institution builder but also an individual who nurtured human relationships with remarkable grace.

Standing here, I am deeply conscious of the weight of this legacy. I thank the Hon'ble Vice Chancellor and the distinguished committee for deeming me worthy of this honour.

The Open University at a Turning Point

Friends, my association with Open and Distance Learning began in 2019, during my tenure as Pro Vice Chancellor of IGNOU, and since 2022 as the Vice Chancellor of Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University in Assam. These two experiences have offered contrasting yet complementary insights into the complex realities of the ODL landscape. At IGNOU, I witnessed the operations of a globally-renowned institution whose brand itself is a symbol of trust. In Assam, my role required extensive grassroots engagement travelling from village to village, college to college, explaining, convincing, and sometimes defending the legitimacy and necessity of open education.

Despite achieving a remarkable active enrolment of over two lakh learners today, with 30,000-35,000 new entrants annually, the frequently repeated question remains: "Is a degree from an Open University at par with that of a conventional university?" This question reveals how deeply entrenched misconceptions continue to be, even after four decades of open education in India.

Reflecting on my own journey has often made me appreciate even more intensely the struggles Prof. G. Ram Reddy must have faced in the early 1980s when the concept of distance education was almost alien to the Indian higher education psyche. To establish the country's first Open University during such times demanded not merely administrative efforts but extraordinary intellectual courage, commitment, conviction and a far-sighted vision, we all could realize and cherished. As we honour his contributions today, we must also ask: What should be the role, the mission, and the future direction of Open Universities in the era of NEP 2020?

This question is not just timely; it is indispensable.

India at a Demographic Crossroads: The Imperative of Employability

Friends! India today stands at a decisive demographic juncture. With over 65% of our population below the age of 35, we possess an unprecedented human capital potential. Yet this demographic dividend is precariously at risk. High dropout rates, limited employability, and a widening mismatch between labour market needs and education, threaten to convert this advantage into a demographic burden.

The challenge before us is not merely to expand higher education quantitatively but to enhance it qualitatively. Producing graduates is no longer adequate; we must produce employable graduates, individuals equipped to succeed in a globally volatile, technology-driven economy. The recent CII-Grant Thornton report,

"Continuous Improvement Journey of Higher Education Institutions," offers an unambiguous message: the Indian higher education ecosystem must reinvent itself, if it is to fulfil the aspirations of NEP 2020.

The report emphasises three transformational shifts structural, pedagogical, and operational. Structurally, universities must be reconfigured into flexible, learner-centric, multidisciplinary ecosystems. Pedagogically, our teaching must shift from content-heavy models to competency-driven, experiential, and technology-enabled learning. Operationally, institutions must adopt agile governance, supported by digital infrastructure and outcome-based evaluation.

At the centre of this transformation is a demographic mandate. India must reach 86.11 million higher education enrolments by 2035, requiring an almost 85% expansion over current levels. CII Reports says, this demand cannot be met by traditional, brick-and-mortar universities alone. It is here that Open Universities emerge as indispensable actors in India's higher education future.

Why Open Universities Matter More Than Ever Before

Open Universities were built on the principles of access, inclusivity, equity, affordability, and flexibility. Over the decades, they have democratized higher education for millions who, for various socio-economic, geographic, or personal reasons, would otherwise remain outside the formal higher education system.

However, the NEP 2020 context demands a re-articulation of this mission. Open Universities must now reposition themselves from being institutions of access alone to becoming centres of excellence in digital learning, flexible learning pathways, and employability-oriented education.

While access remains foundational, the future of ODL rests on how effectively Open Universities can address three pressing

national imperatives:

1. the urgent need for employability and skill development,
2. the demand for large-scale capacity expansion, and
3. the need for lifelong learning in a rapidly changing knowledge economy.

In many ways, Open Universities are inherently structured to meet these goals. Their learner-centred models, modular curricula, technological orientation, and openness to non-traditional learners give them a unique advantage in driving the NEP 2020 reforms. But to truly realize this potential, a systemic re-envisioning of their academic, administrative, and operational frameworks is required.

Employability as the New Academic Imperative

One of the most critical concerns today is the employability of graduates. Studies indicate that nearly 40% of core job skills will undergo significant transformation by 2030. The era in which degrees alone guaranteed employment has ended. Employers increasingly seek demonstrable competencies digital literacy, communication, adaptability, teamwork, data analysis, and industry-relevant technical skills.

NEP 2020 rightly notes that India's higher education system places inadequate emphasis on cognitive development and measurable learning outcomes. For Open Universities institutions that serve diverse learners the responsibility to address this gap is far greater.

Employability can no longer be a desirable outcome; it must be a design principle underlying the open university system.

Curricular Re-Envisioning

The first step in this transformation is embedding employability within the curriculum itself. Every programme must include

structured modules on communication, digital literacy, analytical reasoning, teamwork, and career readiness. These should not function as peripheral add-ons but as credit-bearing components aligned with degree outcomes.

This necessitates a shift towards outcome-based curriculum design clearly defined programme outcomes, measurable competencies, and real-world aligned assessment frameworks. NEP 2020's emphasis on higher-order thinking skills must be operationalised through pedagogical innovation and technology-enhanced learning.

Micro-Credentials and Modular Learning

A significant shift in the global education ecosystem is the rise of micro-credentials short, stackable, skill-specific learning modules that offer flexibility, relevance, and instant employability value. For Open Universities, integrating micro-credentials is not merely an innovation but a strategic necessity. They enable:

- personalised and self-paced learning,
- targeted upskilling for specific job roles,
- seamless integration with degree pathways through credit transfer,
- and continuous professional development through lifelong learning.

Micro-credentials must therefore be woven into the very structure of academic programmes.

Pedagogical Transformation

The quality of pedagogy is the most decisive determinant of learning outcomes. Open Universities must shift from print-centric, theory-heavy approaches to multimodal learning Audio-Visual-based content, virtual classrooms, interactive simulations, and work-integrated learning.

The future of ODL lies in multimodal, blended, technology-driven ecosystems supported by AI-enabled personalised learning pathways and digital assessments.

Work-integrated learning through internships, field projects, apprenticeships, and virtual industry assignments must become a compulsory element of programmes.

Academic-Industry Convergence: A Structural Necessity

No education system can be meaningfully aligned with employability without deep, structured, and continuous collaboration with industry. For Open Universities, whose learners often lack direct exposure to workplace environments, such collaboration becomes even more critical.

The synergy between academia and industry must move beyond occasional consultation to become a structural element of the ODL ecosystem.

Formal industry advisory boards must guide curriculum design. Co-branded programmes with industry-recognised certifications enhance credibility and job alignment. Apprenticeships and on-the-job training whether physical or virtual must be expanded systematically.

Continuous labour market intelligence and data-driven curriculum updates will ensure that programmes remain aligned with emerging job sectors and technological disruptions. This model is not merely desirable but essential for the survival and relevance of ODL institutions.

Governance, Digital Transformation, and Institutional Agility

The future Open University must be an agile institution responsive, efficient, and digitally empowered. The CII report identifies agile governance as central to institutional resilience. For Open Universities, agility must manifest in collaborative decision-

making, decentralised academic structures, and seamless digital workflows.

Digitisation of admissions, evaluations, learner support, grievance redressal, and faculty development brings transparency and scalability. Analytics-driven systems allow universities to track learner retention, performance, and employability outcomes creating a feedback loop that strengthens quality assurance.

Institutional agility is not a matter of administrative convenience; it is the core mechanism through which Open Universities can respond quickly to new job roles, evolving skills, and emerging technological landscapes.

The Open University as a Lifelong Learning Institution

A defining aspiration of NEP 2020 is the creation of a vibrant culture of lifelong learning. The knowledge economy of the 21st century demands that individuals reskill and upskill continuously.

Open Universities, by virtue of their flexible structures, inclusive admissions, and modular learning pathways, are uniquely positioned to become the national hubs of lifelong learning. The challenge is to build systems that enable:

- Entry and exit at multiple points without academic penalty,
- Recognition of prior learning,
- Integration of micro-skills into degree programmes,
- and lifelong learner portfolios documenting competencies.

By becoming engines of re-skilling and up-skilling, Open Universities contribute not only to individual empowerment but also to national productivity and economic growth.

Revisiting the Foundational Vision of Prof. G. Ram Reddy

As we reflect on these emerging roles and responsibilities, it is important to revisit the foundational ideals of Prof. G. Ram Reddy.

His vision was rooted in the belief that access to higher education is a fundamental right, not a privilege reserved for a few. He saw education as a catalyst for social transformation, national development, and individual empowerment.

Yet Prof. Reddy was not merely a visionary of access; he was a visionary of quality, innovation, and institutional excellence. He dreamt of Open Universities that were not only inclusive but also academically robust and technologically advanced. Today, his dream finds its fullest expression in the goals of NEP 2020.

The task before us is to reinterpret his legacy in the modern context to preserve the ideals he cherished, adapt them to contemporary realities, and advance them boldly into the future.

A New Social Contract for Open Universities

As India stands at the threshold of a new educational era, Open Universities must embrace a new social contract one that binds them to the aspirations of millions who seek knowledge, opportunity, and dignity through education. The NEP 2020 moment is not simply a policy transition; it is a historic opportunity for Open Universities to redefine their identity, expand their role, and strengthen their national relevance.

The Way Forward

As we look to the future, it is evident that the Open University system must undergo a purposeful transformation structurally, academically, and culturally if it is to fulfil the aspirations set forth by NEP 2020. The foremost priority is to redefine the value proposition of Open Universities. For decades, access, affordability, and flexibility formed their core identity, opening the doors of higher education to millions. However, in the NEP era, this identity alone is no longer adequate. The emphasis must shift decisively from an access-driven model to a learner-success-driven model one that

prioritises engagement, retention, competency development, and demonstrable learning outcomes. Only then can Open Universities be recognised not as alternative pathways, but as vibrant, learner-centric institutions offering rich academic experiences.

A second major challenge lies in addressing the persistent structural stagnation that has limited the scale and impact of Open Universities. Despite their long history and potential to contribute one-third of national enrolments, OUs currently account for barely 11-12%. High dropout rates, uneven learner support, variable academic quality, and state-wise disparities reveal systemic issues that cannot be resolved through piece-meal reforms. What is required is a comprehensive strengthening of learner support mechanisms, coherent policy frameworks across states, streamlined regulatory processes, and academic cultures that motivate learners to persist and succeed.

Aligned with this transformation is the need to reorganise academic structures from traditional, discipline-centric models to flexible, programme-centric frameworks. NEP 2020's vision of multidisciplinary and holistic education calls for academic ecosystems that foster collaboration across disciplines, enable dynamic curricular revisions, and integrate vocational modules, micro-credentials, and industry partnerships. Such programme-centric governance will make OUs more agile, contemporary, and employability-oriented, allowing learners to construct personalised and stackable learning pathways.

Equally crucial is the intertwined challenge of autonomy, regulation, and institutional credibility. While NEP 2020 advocates enhanced autonomy to promote innovation, Open Universities continue to operate under rigid, centralised, and sometimes discriminatory regulatory norms, particularly within the present Regulatory framework. These constraints hamper their ability to design flexible curricula, adopt emerging delivery models, and

innovate in learner services. A genuinely enabling regulatory architecture equitable, context-sensitive, and reflective of the unique ODL mission is essential, if at all OUs are to realise NEP's transformative vision.

At the same time, building institutional credibility has become indispensable for enhancing the legitimacy of ODL in India's higher education landscape. Strong NAAC accreditation outcomes, credible participation in NIRF rankings, rigorous internal quality assurance mechanisms, and a culture of scholarly engagement now constitute the backbone of institutional trust. Credibility is no longer established through scale alone; it must be demonstrated through transparency, academic excellence, and quality embedded in every stage of the learner journey from curriculum development and assessment to faculty performance and learner support.

Taken together, these reforms learner-success orientation, structural modernisation, programme-centric academic organisation, equitable autonomy, and strengthened credibility form the foundation of a future-ready Open University system. This transformation is not merely administrative; it is philosophical. It calls for reimagining the ideals of openness through the lens of quality, engagement, technology, and lifelong learning. It also demands courage to question established assumptions, sensitivity to evolving learner needs, and a deep commitment to educational equity.

As we honour the legacy of Prof. G. Ram Reddy, the visionary architect of India's open learning movement, we are reminded that great institutions evolve by embracing change with integrity and imagination. NEP 2020 presents precisely such an opportunity a historic moment to re-envision the Open University as a transformative force capable of shaping India's educational destiny. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that Open Universities rise to this moment with clarity of purpose, academic excellence,

and unwavering dedication to the millions who look to them not only for degrees, but for dignity, opportunity, and a better life.

Let us ensure that every learner whether in a village in Assam or a metropolitan city like Hyderabad receives not just a degree but an education that empowers them to lead meaningful, dignified, and productive lives.

Prof. Reddy envisioned a nation where education opens doors. Today, it is our responsibility to ensure that those doors open wider than ever before.

Thank you.

Jai Hind

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Brief Bio-Data

DOB-29th Jan.1961



- **Prof. Rajendra Prasad Das**Vice Chancellor,Krishna KantaHandiqui State Open University, Guwahati, **from 11 Oct.2022 (continuing)**
- **Pro-Vice-Chancellor, IGNOU(9th August, 2019-5th Oct.2022).**
- **Vice-Chancellor of Berhampur University, Berhampur, Odisha (4th August, 2016 to 2nd August, 2019 and completed 3yr full term)**
- **Teaching career spread over Nearly Four decades**, out of which he spent more than **Two decades** in various administrative positions and responsibilities in different Universities such as:
- **Member UGC Distance Education Bureau (DEB) since Nov.2022**
- **Member Board of Management, IGNOU From8th August 2025 (Continuing)**
- **Member Board of Management, IGNOU From June 2020 to 5thOct,2022.**
- **Member Executive Council UPRajashreeTandon Open University 2021-Oct.2022.**
- **Member, Executive Council,Pt.Ravishankar Shukla University (Thrice)**
- **Director, Institute of Management, Pt. Ravishankar Shukla University, Raipur for more than 10 Yrs.**
- **Dean Faculty of Management Studies, Pt. Ravishankar Shukla University, Raipur,(Five Times)**
- **Chief Warden,Pt. Ravishankar Shukla University, Raipur More than Five years**
- **Warden Management Hostel, Vikram University, Ujjain, Five Years**
- **Director College development Council(DCDC), Pt. RS University, Raipur, more than 1 yr.**
- **Member, Academic Council, Pt. Ravishankar Shukla University, Raipur,More than a Decade**
- **Chairman, Board of Studies in Mgmt,Pt. Ravishankar Shukla University, Raipur for a Decade.**
- **Secretary, University Industry Partnership Council (UIPC), Pt.RSUniversity,inception to 2016.**
- **Chairman of Central Board of Studies in Management for Unified Syllabus in Management, Govt. of Chhattisgarh from 2014 to 2016.**
- **Member, Governing Board of Chhattisgarh Administrative Academy,Two KendriyaVidyalayas, Raipur and several other institutions.**
- **Member/Chairman in various AICTE, NAAC, UGC teams.**
- **Member Academic Council, Sunderlal Sharma Open Univ. Chhattisgarh,2020-2022.2023-continuing.**
- **Member Academic Council ,IGNOU,2019-22 and 2023 and continuing**
- **Member of UGC SAP toTezpurCentral University,Assam two terms, and AnamalaiUniv, TN.**
- **President of Pt.Ravishankar Shukla University, Teachers' Association (RUSTA)for 2 Years.**
- **Visiting faculty to IIM, Raipur and Several leading business schools.**
- **Obtained Ph.D. in Management from Kurukshetra University, Haryana,1989**
- **FDPM (IIM, Ahmedabad).**
- **Twelve (12) scholars have been awardedPh.D in Management under his supervision**
- **Published FIVE Books to his credit.**
- **Member of Editorial Boards of several Management Journals and has published More than 100 Research papers in different national, international Journals and edited books.**
- **Participated in more than 100 National and International conferences held in India and abroad.**
- **Best Management Teacher Awarded by Rotary Club and Lions Club, Raipur (CG),SriShankaracahrya group Of Educational Institutions , Bhilai, and IMAGE, Bhilai, Life Time Achievement Award by DSPSR, IndraPrastha University, Delhi**
- **His teaching career spreads starting from XLRI Jamshedpur, Jiwaji University, Gwalior, Vikram University, Ujjain and Professor of Management in Pt. Ravishankar Shukla University, Raipur from 2003 (Continuing).**

Dr. B.R. AMBEDKAR OPEN UNIVERSITY

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