

## Equity and Inclusion in Indian Higher Education

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### Abstract

Equity and inclusion are fundamental principles in shaping the future of higher education, particularly in a diverse and dynamic society like India. This abstract explores the current landscape of equity and inclusion within Indian higher education, emphasizing the importance of accessible, fair, and quality education for all, regardless of socio-economic background, gender, caste, disability, or geographic location. It highlights the challenges faced, including systemic barriers, socio-cultural disparities, and institutional biases that perpetuate inequality. The discussion also examines government policies, affirmative action programs, and initiatives by educational institutions aimed at promoting diversity, representation, and inclusive pedagogy. Furthermore, the role of technology, curriculum reforms, and faculty development in fostering an inclusive academic environment is considered. The abstract concludes by advocating for comprehensive strategies that address structural inequities, enhance student support services, and encourage a culture of belonging, thereby contributing to a more equitable and inclusive higher education system in India.

**Keywords:** Equity, Inclusion, Government Policies, Gender Accessibility, Socio-Economic Structure, Inequities.

### Introduction

In an educational context, equity means providing each student with the resources and support they need to reach their full potential, regardless of their background or circumstances, ensuring a level playing field for all learners. Inclusion in education means creating a learning environment where all students, regardless of their background, abilities, or differences, feel valued, respected and supported to learn and succeed. In India, achieving equity and inclusion in higher education involves addressing disparities based on caste, gender, region, and socio-economic status through government initiatives and policies like the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, aiming for a Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) of 50% by 2035. Introduction to Equity and Inclusion in Indian Higher Education.

Equity and inclusion are fundamental principles that underpin the vision of a just and progressive society. In the context of Indian higher education, these concepts are vital for ensuring that opportunities for academic and personal growth are accessible to all individuals, regardless of their socio-economic background, caste, gender, disability, or geographic location. India's diverse population, marked by varying degrees of social, economic, and cultural disparities, presents both challenges and opportunities in fostering an inclusive educational environment. The Indian higher education system has undergone significant transformations over the years, driven by policies aimed at promoting social justice and equal opportunities. However, despite these efforts, barriers such as socio-economic inequality, caste-based discrimination, gender biases, and limited access for students from marginalized communities continue to persist. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach that encompasses policy reforms, institutional strategies, and community involvement.

This paper explores the dimensions of equity and inclusion within Indian higher education, examining the challenges faced, the role of government initiatives, the contributions of educational institutions, and the emerging trends that shape the future of inclusive learning environments.

### Gender based equity and inclusion in Indian higher education:

Gender inequality and social inclusion are critical issues in higher education, impacting access, retention, and success for all students, particularly women and marginalized groups, requiring a multifaceted approach to address systemic barriers and promote equity. The total Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of Higher Education in India is 27.3%. GER for male and female students are 26.7% and 27.9% respectively.

There are a lot of problems to maintain equity and inclusion in higher education in special reference to women. some reasons are mentioned here:

- **Unequal Access and Opportunities:** Women and marginalized groups often face barriers to accessing higher education, including financial constraints, societal expectations, and discrimination. Even when admitted, they may encounter challenges in retaining their places due to lack of support, harassment, or feeling isolated. Unequal access to resources and opportunities can lead to disparities in academic outcomes and career prospects.
- **Gendered Curriculum and Teaching:** Curricula and teaching methods can perpetuate gender stereotypes and reinforce existing inequalities. Lack of gender-inclusive perspectives in research and teaching can limit the knowledge and skills students gain. Creating a more inclusive and equitable learning environment requires a conscious effort to challenge biases and promote diverse perspectives.
- **Gender Imbalances in Leadership and Staff:** Women are often underrepresented in leadership positions in higher education institutions, both in academia and administration. This lack of female role models and mentors can discourage women from pursuing leadership roles. Addressing gender imbalances in leadership and staff is crucial for promoting gender equality and social inclusion.
- **Strong legal and policy frameworks** are needed to ensure equal access and opportunities for all students. Gender equality and social inclusion training for faculty and staff can help to address unconscious biases as well as Integrating gender perspectives into curricula and research can help to challenge stereotypes and promote a more inclusive understanding of knowledge.

The Indian government has implemented various initiatives and policies to promote gender-based equity and inclusion in higher education. These efforts are aimed at creating a more inclusive environment for women, transgender individuals, and other marginalized groups. Here are some key measures

1. **Policy Frameworks and Committees** and NEP 2020 Emphasizes gender equity, inclusivity, and equal opportunities in higher education. Women's Education Policies focus on increasing female enrollment, retention, and participation in STEM fields.
2. **Schemes for Women's Empowerment:** (i) Betti Bachao Betti Padhao (BBBP) promotes girls' education and gender equality at all levels, including higher education. (ii) Kanya Shiksha Pravas Yojana: Encourages the enrollment of girls in higher education institutions.
3. **Reservation and Gender Quotas:** Some institutions have implemented gender-based quotas, especially in technical and scientific courses.
4. **Anti-Sexual Harassment Policies:** Implementation of the Visakha Guidelines to prevent harassment and ensure a safe learning environment.
5. **SWAYAM and e-PG Pathshala,** Online platforms promoting gender-neutral access to education as well as GIAN (Global Initiative of Academic Networks) encourages international collaboration, providing opportunities for women in higher education.

6. Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019: Encourages institutions to adopt inclusive practices for transgender students.

### **Caste-based equity and inclusion in Indian higher education:**

Despite affirmative action policies, leading to social exclusion and discrimination against marginalized groups, particularly SC and Scheduled Tribes. While policies aim for inclusion, systemic biases and lack of support mechanisms hinder true integration and social mobility. The enrollment rate for SC and ST students between 2011 and 2018 was 13.45% and 4.8%, respectively, despite constitutional mandates of at least 15% and 7.5%. A large portion of students (around 79.5%) are enrolled in undergraduate programs. Only about 5.8% of ST students pursue higher education, compared to the national average of around 27.3%. The educational development of STs is uneven across different states, with some states showing better performance than others. The literacy rate among tribal people in India was 59% according to the 2011 Census, lower than the 73% national average. Some states with a higher concentration of tribal populations have shown better results, including Mizoram (91.5%), Nagaland (80.0%), Manipur (77.4%), and Meghalaya (74.5%). In India, Scheduled Tribes (STs) face significant inequalities in accessing and succeeding in higher education, despite affirmative action policies, due to socio-economic factors, discrimination, and limited infrastructure in tribal areas, hindering social inclusion.

#### **Challenges Faced by Scheduled Tribes in Higher Education:**

(1). Low Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER): The GER for STs is considerably lower than the national average, indicating a significant gap in access to higher education. (2). Socio-Economic Factors: Poverty, lack of resources, and the need for children to contribute to household income in tribal areas significantly impact opportunities. (3). Geographical Isolation and Infrastructure: Remote tribal areas often lack adequate infrastructure, including schools, transportation, and quality education resources, further hindering access to higher education. (4). Discrimination and Prejudice: Tribal students may face discrimination and prejudice from faculty and peers, leading to a sense of exclusion and impacting their academic performance and well-being. (5). Cultural and Linguistic Barriers: The language of instruction in higher education may not be the mother tongue of many tribal students, creating a barrier to learning and participation. (6). Limited Access to Scholarships and Financial Aid: Even when scholarships are available, tribal students may face difficulties in accessing them due to bureaucratic hurdles and lack of awareness.

#### **Government Initiatives for caste-based equity and inclusion in Indian higher education:**

The government plays a crucial role in promoting equity and inclusion through various initiatives, including affirmative policies targeting marginalized groups, scholarships, and capacity building programs. Some initiatives are such as (1) The NEP 2020 aims to expand the education system and increase the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) to 50% by 2035, focusing on providing access for students from marginalized backgrounds. (2) The UGC has launched initiatives like fellowships, scholarships, coaching schemes, and support for institutions with a higher proportion of SCs, STs, Minorities, and OBCs to enhance access with equity. (3) National Scheduled Tribes Finance and Development Corporation (NSTFDC) offers schemes like Term Loan, Adivasi Mahila Sashaktikaran Yojana (exclusive scheme for Scheduled Tribe women), and Adivasi Shiksha Rinn Yojana (Education Loan scheme). (4) The Indian government has implemented reservation policies to ensure representation of STs in higher education, but these policies have not been fully effective in addressing the underlying inequalities.

### **Minority based equity and inclusion in Indian higher education:**

In Indian higher education, minority groups and disadvantaged communities face inequalities in access and inclusion, with factors like caste, religion, and socio-economic status playing a role. While efforts are being made to address these disparities, challenges remain in ensuring equitable opportunities for all.

Data from the All-India Survey of Higher Education (AISHE) indicates that Muslim students are underrepresented in higher education in India, with enrollment rates lower than other marginalized communities like Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). Despite constituting 14% of India's population, Muslims have a higher education enrollment rate of only around 4.6%. There's been a decline in the number of Muslim students enrolled in higher education, with a drop from 21,00,860 in 2019-20 to 19,21,713 in 2020-21. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of Muslim students is generally higher in southern states and Union territories compared to the Hindi-heartland states such as Telangana leads with a GER of nearly 34%, followed by Tamil Nadu (around 28%), and Kerala (20%). States like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan have relatively low GERs for Muslim students. Inequity in higher education for Indian Muslims stems from a complex interplay of socioeconomic factors, cultural norms, and historical disadvantages, including poverty, limited access to quality education, and societal discrimination.

#### Challenges Faced by minorities in Higher Education:

Poverty is a major barrier, forcing many Muslim families to prioritize immediate survival over education, especially for girls. Traditional gender roles and patriarchal attitudes can limit girls' educational aspirations and opportunities, with some families prioritizing early marriage and domestic responsibilities over education. Some families prioritize religious education (madrasas) over secular education, potentially hindering access to essential academic qualifications and skills. Orthodox interpretations of certain Islamic teachings can lead to restrictions on women's access to education and limit their overall advancement.

#### Government efforts for equity and inclusion in higher education of minorities:

The Indian government has implemented various schemes and policies, including scholarships, financial aid, and infrastructure development, to improve educational opportunities for Indian Muslims, particularly in higher education, aiming to promote equity and address historical disparities. Some are mentioned here: (1) Maulana Azad National Fellowship Scheme: Provides financial assistance to minority candidates who clear the UGC-NET or Joint CSIR-UGC-NET examination. (2) Nay Savera - Free Coaching and Allied Scheme: Offers free coaching to minority students for qualifying in entrance examinations for technical, medical, and professional courses, as well as competitive exams. (3) Padho Pardesh: Provides interest subsidy on educational loans for minority students pursuing higher studies abroad. (4) Nai Udaan: Supports minority candidates who clear the preliminary examinations of UPSC, State PSC, and SSC. (5) Scheme for Infrastructure Development Private Aided/Unaided Minority Institutes (IDMI) Focuses on improving infrastructure in elementary, secondary, and senior secondary schools, including minority-run institutions. (6) Ministry of Minority Affairs implements various schemes like 'Seekho Aur Kamao', 'Nai Manzil', 'Nai Roshni', 'USTTAD' and 'Hamari Dharohar' focused on skilling, training and entrepreneurship for minority communities.

#### Socioeconomic based equity and inclusion in Indian higher education:

In India, economic inequality significantly impacts social inclusion in higher education, with disparities in access and outcomes based on income, caste, and location, requiring targeted policies and interventions to ensure equitable opportunities. Data indicates that students from Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), including those from low-income families, face challenges in accessing quality higher education, but initiatives like the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the EWS reservation aim to address these disparities.

The Indian government has implemented various policies and schemes to improve access to higher education for socioeconomically weaker sections, including the 10% reservation for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) and scholarships like the Pre-Matric and Post-Matric Scholarship Schemes. The Constitution (103rd Amendment) Act, 2019, introduced a 10% reservation for EWS within the general category in central government-run educational institutions and private educational institutions. National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 Emphasizes the need to address the issues of students belonging to Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) and their increased participation in higher education.

### **Equity and inclusion in Indian higher education for Physically disabled person:**

They must thus be completely assimilated into society, beginning with equitable access to high-quality education. However, people with disabilities are still underrepresented in higher education and are among the most vulnerable, excluded, and marginalised populations on campuses.

In Indian higher education, data indicates that while enrollment of students with disabilities (PwDs) has increased, they remain significantly underrepresented compared to the general student population, with only about 0.2% of students in higher education institutions being PwDs. In 2019-20, out of a total enrollment of 37.4 million students in higher education, only 85,877 were PwDs. The AllIndia Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) reports a total enrollment of 38.5 million students in higher education, with 92,831 PwD students enrolled, compared to 85,877 in 2019. Gender disparity in PwD student enrollment also exists, with more male than female PwD students enrolled in higher education.

### **Challenges Faced by physically disabled persons in Higher Education:**

- **Inaccessible Infrastructure and Facilities:** Many educational institutions lack ramps, elevators, accessible restrooms, and other necessary infrastructure to accommodate students with disabilities. Textbooks, online resources, and other learning materials are often not available in accessible formats (e.g., Braille, audio formats). Students with disabilities may face difficulties accessing institutions due to inadequate or inaccessible public transportation options.
- **Lack of Support Services:** Many students with disabilities lack access to necessary assistive technologies (e.g., screen readers, speech-to-text software).
- **Many educators and staff are unaware of the needs and challenges faced by students with disabilities,** leading to a lack of appropriate accommodations.
- **Students with disabilities may face discrimination and prejudice from educators, staff, and peers,** leading to feelings of isolation and exclusion.
- **Lack of Enforcement:** There is a lack of effective mechanisms to ensure that institutions comply with laws and policies related to disability inclusion.
- **Reservation Policies:** Even with reservation policies in place, students with disabilities may still face difficulties accessing higher education due to a lack of awareness, inadequate implementation, and other barriers.

### **Government efforts for equity and inclusion in higher education of physically disabled persons:**

There are many efforts done by Indian government some are mentioned here: (1) As per section 32 of the RPWD Act, all public universities are mandated to reserve at least 5% of study places for the "accessibility disabled". Section 16 (ii) of the 2016 Act states that the premises, buildings and other facilities of educational institutions should be accessible to children with disabilities. (2) The NEP aims to create an inclusive and equitable education system, including for students with disabilities, with provisions for accessible infrastructure, equitable accommodations, and assistive devices. (3) The UGC aims to improve the

participation and learning experience of persons with disabilities in HEIs through schemes like the Higher Education for Persons with Special Needs (HEPSN) scheme. (4) his scheme, made available in the XII Plan (2012-17), aims to make HEIs more responsive to the needs of disadvantaged social groups, including persons with disabilities.

### **Inclusive and Equitable Higher Education in India: Solutions**

Ensuring inclusive and equitable higher education in India requires a multifaceted approach, addressing barriers related to socio-economic status, gender, disability, caste, and geography. Here are key solutions to promote inclusivity and equity: (1) **Policy Reforms:** Strengthen reservation policies for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and economically weaker sections (EWS) while ensuring effective implementation. Allocate special funds for institutions serving underprivileged communities and for scholarships targeting marginalized groups. (2) **Improving Access:** Increase the number of higher education institutions, particularly in rural and underserved areas. Promote digital literacy and provide free or affordable internet access to bridge the digital divide. (3) **Financial Support Systems:** Expand merit-cum-means-based scholarships and student loan schemes with flexible repayment options. (4) **Curriculum and Pedagogy:** Incorporate diverse perspectives, histories, and voices in the curriculum to reflect India's multicultural society. Use adaptive learning technologies to cater to different learning styles and needs. (5) **Faculty Development:** Encourage the recruitment of faculty from diverse backgrounds to promote representation. Conduct workshops on inclusive teaching practices and sensitivity training. (6) **Support Systems for Students:** Establish mentorship schemes for first-generation college students and marginalized groups. (7) **Promoting Gender Equity:** strong anti-harassment policies and create safe spaces for women and . Support women's participation in STEM and leadership roles through targeted programs.

### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, achieving inclusive and equitable higher education in India requires a multi-faceted approach that addresses systemic barriers, promotes diversity, and ensures equal opportunities for all. The solutions outlined—such as policy reforms, targeted scholarships, curriculum diversification, improved infrastructure, and community engagement—are critical to creating an environment where every student, regardless of socio-economic background, gender, caste, or disability, can thrive. Government initiatives like reservation policies and financial aid programs must be complemented by institutional efforts to foster an inclusive culture. Additionally, leveraging technology can bridge gaps in access and enhance the quality of education across rural and underprivileged regions.

Ultimately, the goal is to transform higher education into a powerful tool for social mobility, economic development, and national progress. By prioritizing equity and inclusion, India can build a resilient, innovative, and globally competitive higher education system that truly reflects the diversity and potential of its population.

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174 indicates that GER of female is higher than male.