

DIVERSITY AND DISPARITIES: A STUDY ON CASTE, RELIGION, GENDER, AND DISABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA

Moumita Barman

WORKING PAPER

ISSUE -01 | JANUARY - 2024 | VOLUME - 04

In collaboration
with





DIVERSITY AND DISPARITIES:

A STUDY ON CASTE, RELIGION, GENDER, AND DISABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA

Moumita Barman

In Collaboration with : IMRC Indian Muslim Relief & Charities

WORKING PAPER SERIES

ISSUE - 11 | JANUARY - 2024



Diversity and Disparities: A Study on Caste, Religion, Gender, and Disability in Higher Education in India

Moumita Barman

Abstract : Higher education plays a pivotal role in shaping individuals and societies. However, barriers such as socio-economic disparities, and discrimination based on identity factors like religion, caste, gender, and disability hinder inclusivity. These obstacles prevent equal access to opportunities, limiting the diverse representation crucial for a comprehensive and enriched educational environment. This working paper explores how different factors like religion, caste, gender, and disability affect access to quality higher education in India. It looks at these inequalities closely using existing secondary research to understand their impact on educational opportunities. Additionally, the paper proposes an inclusive policy framework rooted in an intersectional approach. By suggesting this approach, the paper aims to shed light on these inequalities and promote an inclusive policy framework for higher education.

Keywords: Higher Education, Religion, Caste, Gender, Transgender Community, Disability,

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Religion and Higher Education	05
• Religion as an Influence on Education	05
• Status of Muslims	07
• Data Validating the Concerns	07
• Budget Slashes and the Future of Minority Education	08
• Bridging Educational Disparities for Minority Communities	10
Caste and Higher Education	10
• Affirmative Actions in India	11
• Caste-based Discrimination in India	11
• Caste Discrimination in Higher Education	12
• Tragic Caste-related Incidents	14
Gender and Higher Education	16
• Gender Disparities in Higher Education	17
• Transgender Community and Higher Education in India	18
• The Historical Evolution of the Transgender Community in India	19
• Policies and Enactments	20
• Challenges Faced by the Transgender Community	21
• Need for Inclusive Strategies for the Transgender Community	23
Persons with Disabilities and Higher Education	24
• Disability in India	25
• Policies for Persons with Disabilities in India	25
• Barriers to Higher Education for Persons with Disabilities	27
Way Forward: Intersectional Perspective for Education	29
References	31

Introduction

Inclusion is characterised as an inherent and fundamental human entitlement. Its purpose is to welcome individuals regardless of their race, gender, disabilities, medical requirements, or any other specific needs. The objective is to provide equal access and opportunities while eradicating discrimination and intolerance (elimination of obstacles). Its influence extends across all facets of societal existence (Hudson, 2022).

The Indian Constitution aims to ensure fairness and inclusion of all citizens. It directs the government to create equal opportunities actively. The ideas of equality, fair access, and equal opportunities are detailed in Articles 14 (equality rights), 15 (access to education), and 16 (public employment). These articles emphasise that the state should not discriminate against individuals based on religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth.

The Constitution additionally instructs the state to ensure social, economic, and political justice in the nation's institutions (Article 38(1)). An amendment in 1976 emphasised the state's duty to minimise income inequalities and eliminate disparities in status, opportunities, and facilities among individuals and groups residing in different areas or involved in various professions (Article 38(2)) (Shariff, 2016).

One way of eradicating this inequality and promoting inclusion is the notion of education. When a state guarantees that every individual attains their inherent entitlement to quality education throughout their lifetime, this leads to embracing an inclusive educational approach. This approach entails considering the specific needs of each person, fostering the participation and success of all learners collectively. It recognises that every individual possesses distinctive traits, passions, capabilities, and educational requirements. It places particular emphasis on supporting learners who might be susceptible to marginalisation, exclusion, or academic under performance (eGyanKosh, n.d.).

Nevertheless, despite considerable advancements made in the past decade, a significant number of individuals still face barriers that prevent them from accessing education, resulting in unequal distribution of learning opportunities. Globally, one out of every five children, adolescents, and young people remains entirely excluded from educational opportunities. Factors such as poverty, geographical location, gender, language barriers, disabilities, ethnicity, religion, migration, or displacement status persist in determining and constraining these educational prospects. Alarming, almost 40% of children lack access to education in a language they comprehend, and children with disabilities continue to face disproportionate exclusion from schools. Alarming, around three-

and constraining these educational prospects. Alarmingly, almost 40% of children lack access to education in a language they comprehend, and children with disabilities continue to face disproportionate exclusion from schools. Alarmingly, around three-quarters of all primary-age children, amounting to 9 million individuals, particularly girls, may never have the chance to step foot in a classroom.

In India, the University Grants Commission noted that access to higher education remains influenced by various inequalities prevalent in our society, encompassing factors like gender, caste, religion, socio-economic class, geographic location, and disability. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), categorised by social groups, not only differs between regions and states but also exhibits variations even within specific districts of a state (University Grants Commission, 2013).

Hence, this working paper centres on investigating the inequalities in attaining quality higher education about religion, caste, gender, and disability. It focuses on these differences via secondary research to grasp their scope and influence on educational prospects. Additionally, the paper endeavours to propose an inclusive policy framework for education in India by advocating for an intersectional approach, aiming to address multiple layers of identity and promote inclusivity.

Religion and Higher Education

Religion and higher education hold paramount importance in the context of a diverse and populous country like India. Higher education serves as a key prerequisite for the socio-economic development of both individuals and the nation. It is instrumental in producing and harnessing human resources effectively.

Since gaining independence, India has made significant strides towards achieving universal education and ensuring access to quality education for its population. There has been a remarkable increase in the number of schools, colleges, universities, and teachers.

According to the most recent All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2020–21, the enrolment in higher education in India has risen to approximately 4.14 crores in 2020–21, up from 3.85 crores in 2019–20. Notably, female enrolment has also increased to 2.01 crores, marking a growth of 13 lakh from the previous year 2019-20. The Gender Parity Index shows that more females have enrolled than males since 2017–18. Notably, enrolment of SC, ST, and OBC students has also risen. According to the AISHE report of 2020-21, there has been a 28% rise in the enrolment of SC students, a 47% increase in the enrolment of ST students, and a 32% increase in the enrolment of OBC students. The number of universities and colleges has increased, and most institutions are now located and built in rural areas. Faculty gender parity has improved, with 75 females for every 100 male faculty (Ministry of Education, India).

For India to continue on the path towards progress, it is essential to ensure equal opportunities for development among all sections of its population, with higher education playing a crucial role in achieving this goal. However, the reality is that there is an unequal representation of religious communities in higher education, and the condition of the Muslim community is distressing.

Religion as an Influence on Education

Throughout history, religion and education have maintained a close relationship, influencing each other significantly. In various cultures, religious leaders and organisations played pivotal roles in establishing educational infrastructure, often evolving into universities. For instance, Buddhist and Hindu monasteries in ancient India housed the most learned individuals, while Christian monks in the Middle East and Europe preserved knowledge in libraries and universities.

In Islam, early contributions to various fields were made under the encouragement of seeking knowledge. However, debates persist over whether subsequent events led to a decline in secular education, with some attributing it to political shifts prioritizing religious over scientific education. Nowadays, Islamic religious leaders still wield influence, coexisting with secular educational institutions in some Muslim-majority countries (Mitchell, 2023).

Hinduism, from its inception, has highly valued education to alleviate human suffering caused by ignorance. Hindu scriptures emphasise seeking knowledge through dialogue and questioning. While historically, the caste system in India limited mass literacy, the perception of education as a universal right has gradually extended to all members of the faith.

Religious norms and doctrines also shape attitudes toward education, with Protestantism historically encouraging women's education, in contrast to some Muslim societies where family laws may hinder women's higher education. Studies suggest that fundamentalist beliefs, regardless of the religion, can negatively influence educational attainment, while some argue that religious involvement can enhance social capital, promoting educational success (Mitchell, 2023).

In exploring the impact of religion on education, scholars also consider theories about education's potential impact on religion, suggesting that higher educational attainment might lead to a decline in religious identity. This complex interplay between religion and education continues to shape societies and individuals worldwide.

Regarding socio-religious affiliation and education in India, the paper by Basant and Sen, "Who Participates in Higher Education in India? Rethinking the Role of Affirmative Action," analysed how socio-religious affiliation affects higher education participation. Findings indicate that socio-religious factors do influence participation, but significance varies among groups and segments. Urban Hindu upper castes (UCs) consistently have higher prospects, while Muslim OBCs have the lowest. Rural Hindu STs show better chances in the current generation. Disparities between upper castes and marginalised groups decrease over generations in urban areas but not significantly in rural areas. The impact of affiliation on becoming graduates is less pronounced in eligible segments, particularly in urban areas. Rankings of groups' participation probabilities are unstable across models, indicating the role of individual and household characteristics. The analysis underscores the intricate role of socio-religious affiliation in higher education participation and highlights the potential impact of affirmative action policies (Basant & Sen, 2010).

Status of Muslims

Based on the 2001 Census data, it was found by the Sachar Committee that 7% of individuals aged 20 and above, across all backgrounds, have attained a degree or diploma. In contrast, only 4% of the Muslim population falls into this category. The Committee Report highlighted a widening disparity between Muslims and other Socio-Religious Categories (SRCs) as education levels rise. The committee also observed that unemployment rates were highest among Muslim graduates compared to other socio-religious categories, both among the economically disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged groups (PRS Legislative Research, 2006).

In a study conducted by J. Sebastian, “Under-representation of Muslims in Higher Education: How and Why the Kerala Story Is Somewhat Different?” it was opined that there exists an underrepresentation of Muslims in higher education across India, except for Kerala, which has a unique situation. Historically, Mappila Muslims in Kerala's Malabar region were less educated due to strained relations with the British and conservative beliefs. However, after independence and Kerala's formation, they rapidly improved educationally, driven by efforts from the Indian Union Muslim League, social reform movements, the Muslim Educational Society, and remittances from Gulf countries. Gulf remittances were especially transformative, leading to self-financed educational institutions (Sebastian, 2019).

Data Validating the Concerns

The All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) report for the academic year 2020–21 indicated a decline in the enrolment of Muslim students in higher educational institutions in India. Despite comprising over 14% of the country's population, the national average of Muslim students enrolling for higher education decreased from 5.5% in 2019–20 to 4.6% in 2020–21. In terms of numbers, the overall enrolment of Muslim students decreased from 21 lakh in 2019–20 to 19.2 lakh in the following academic year.

However, there were notable exceptions to this trend in certain states. West Bengal, Telangana, and Kerala witnessed an increase in the number of Muslim students enrolled in higher education. West Bengal's enrolment figures remained steady, with approximately 2.38 lakh Muslim students joining higher education in both the 2019–20 and 2020–21 academic years. While the number of male Muslim students slightly decreased, the number of female Muslim students increased during the same period.

Similarly, Telangana experienced an increase in the enrolment of Muslim students, rising from 1.21 lakh in 2019–20 to 1.28 lakh in 2020–21. Kerala also witnessed growth in the enrolment of Muslim students, from 1.66 lakh in 2019–20 to 1.70 lakh in 2020–21.

On the other hand, Uttar Pradesh, where Muslims account for approximately 20% of the population, reported a disheartening enrolment rate of only 4.5% for higher education despite a notable increase in the number of colleges in the state. Several other states experienced significant declines in the enrolment of Muslim students for higher education. Jammu and Kashmir saw a decline of 26%, while Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu witnessed decreases of 8.5% and 8.1%, respectively. In Delhi, alarming statistics revealed that one in every five Muslim students did not pursue higher education after passing the Senior School Certificate Examination. The decline in Muslim enrolment was prevalent even in smaller states like Gujarat (6.1%), Bihar (5.7%), and Karnataka (3.7%). Tamil Nadu stood out as the exception, with a decline observed only among Muslim students (Sabrang India, 2023).

The decline in the enrolment of Muslim students is noteworthy, especially considering the overall increase of 7.5% in student enrolments across the country in 2020–21 compared to 2019–20. Political analyst Subhamoy Maitra suggests that these figures may be understood from an economic perspective. He explains that due to the increasing trend of privatisation in higher education, Muslim students, who are economically disadvantaged compared to other communities, may have fewer opportunities. States with improved enrolment numbers may have a higher number of state-run higher educational institutions and fewer private institutes. Maitra also speculates that the pro-poor, liberal, and leftist educational traditions in West Bengal, Kerala, and Telangana might contribute to a slightly different enrolment trend in these states (Singh, 2023).

Budget Slashes and the Future of Minority Education

In the financial year 2023–24, the Ministry of Minority Affairs of India experienced a substantial budget reduction of 38%, resulting in severe cutbacks in various educational and skill development schemes intended to support minority communities. The total budget allocation for educational empowerment for minorities has decreased significantly from Rs.2,515 crore in the previous year to Rs.1,689 crore this year (Mishra, 2023).

Key educational programs have suffered immensely due to the budget slashes. The merit-cum-means scholarship, which aids students from minority backgrounds in pursuing professional and technical courses, received only Rs.44 crores compared to the previous year's Rs.365 crores. Similarly, the pre-matric scholarship funding for minorities was reduced from Rs.1,425 crores to Rs.433 crores, while the post-matric scholarship witnessed a rise from Rs.515 crores to Rs.1,065 crores.

Several schemes that supported minority students in clearing exams conducted by UPSC, SSC, and state public service commissions received no funds this year despite having a budget of Rs. eight crores in the previous year. Additionally, free coaching and allied schemes for minorities saw a budget cut of approximately 60%.

Apart from education, skill development initiatives have also suffered. Nai Manzil and USTAD, previously allocated budgets of Rs.235 crores and Rs.7 crores, respectively, received a mere Rs.10 lakhs this year. Research schemes for minorities faced a reduced budget of Rs.20 crores from Rs.41 crores last year.

The Education Scheme for Madrasas and Minorities witnessed a significant budget cut, receiving only Rs.10 crores, a 93% decrease from the previous year's allocation of Rs.160 crores. Special schemes for minorities, encompassing research, studies, publicity, monitoring and evaluation of development schemes, conservation protection of minority heritage, and schemes for containing population decline, have also experienced almost a 50% reduction in their budget.

The drastic reduction in funds for these educational and skill development initiatives poses significant challenges and may hinder the progress and empowerment of minority communities in India (Mishra, 2023).

In response to questions about the discontinuation of the Maulana Azad National Fellowship (MANF) and limiting the Pre-Matric Scholarship Scheme to students of classes IX and X, the Union Minister of the Ministry of Minorities Affairs, Smriti Irani, reiterated that the government has implemented various schemes for the welfare of all strata, including minorities. The decision to discontinue the MANF was justified by stating that there are other fellowship schemes available for students from minority communities under different ministries.

Critics argue that there is a flaw in the government's justification that the MANF overlaps with the Other Backward Classes National Fellowship (OBCNF), and students from minority communities are not considered as part of the OBC, SC, or ST categories. Therefore, students from minority communities are left without specific support.

The government also defended limiting the Pre-Matric Scholarship Scheme to classes IX and X by citing the Right to Education (RTE) Act, which provides free and compulsory education up to class VIII. However, this decision appears to be a step back in terms of encouraging access to education for underprivileged and minority students (The Hindu Bureau, 2023).

Bridging Educational Disparities for Minority Communities

The government's recent decisions to cut back on schemes that benefit minority groups have raised concerns that the government is reducing access to education and research for the minority community. Critics argue that the government has not adequately considered the systematic oppression and discrimination faced by minorities, and these decisions may further discourage minority students from pursuing education and research opportunities. This highlights the importance of addressing disparities and ensuring equal opportunities in higher education for all sections of society.

The government must take concrete steps to bridge the educational gap. Affirmative action policies and targeted support can play a crucial role in providing a level playing field for minority students. Investing in the education of minority communities is not only an ethical imperative but also a necessary step towards building a more inclusive and prosperous nation. By addressing these issues, the government can demonstrate its commitment to creating a fair and equitable educational system that empowers all citizens, regardless of their socio-religious background. Only then can India truly harness its diverse human potential and pave the way for a brighter future.

Caste and Higher Education

Historical Context of Caste System

The caste system and untouchability in India are deeply entrenched social structures that persist alongside the country's modern advancements. Originating from ancient texts like the Rig Veda, this system categorised society into four varnas, creating a hierarchical order with Brahmins at the top and Shudras at the bottom. Over time, this structure relegated some groups, known as Dalits, to menial occupations, facing societal discrimination. Interpretations of these ancient systems vary (Mittal, 2016).

Efforts to reform this system began in colonial India, championed by figures like Jyotirao Phule and Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. Their initiatives and advocacy for adapting to current needs have resulted in affirmative action to safeguard the rights of the marginalised (Mittal, 2016). However, even with these constitutional assurances of equality, caste-based discrimination persists as a societal truth, with educational institutions remaining susceptible to its influence.

Affirmative Actions in India

To address historical injustices and promote social inclusion, the Indian government introduced affirmative action policies, known as reservations or quotas, in educational institutions and public sector employment. The concept of “reservation” has been firmly established within the Constitution of India, specifically articulated in Article 15(4) and Article 16(4). These constitutional provisions were introduced to ensure socio-economic justice for the vulnerable and marginalised segments of society, with the aim of achieving equality. Following the implementation of the Constitution, the Government of India embarked on initiatives to implement reservation policies for the backward classes in alignment with this constitutional commitment.

In adherence to the constitutional obligations and directives for affirmative action, as outlined in Articles 14, 15(4), 16(4), 338(10), and 340(1) in conjunction with Article 46 of the Indian Constitution, reservations were extended to backward classes based on the recommendations of the Second Backward Classes Commission, led by B. P. Mandal. Presently, seats are reserved for scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and backward classes in various undergraduate and postgraduate courses encompassing general, technical, medical, and other professional disciplines, alongside allocations in public employment (Gupta, 2018).

This affirmative action in the form of reservations reflects the constitutional mandate to address historical injustices and create opportunities for historically marginalised communities, aiming to bridge the gaps and foster inclusivity in higher education and public employment sectors.

Caste-based Discrimination in India

Despite strides in societal advancement, research has shown that caste-based segregation and discrimination continue to be prevalent across the country (Pew Research Center, 2023). Notably, a considerable proportion of Brahmins express reluctance to accept neighbours from scheduled castes. However, a majority of the respondents believe that caste discrimination is not prevalent in the country, with around two-thirds of people belonging to scheduled castes or tribes stating there is no widespread discrimination against their groups. This sentiment likely stems from personal experiences, as 82% of Indians reported no personal encounters with caste-based discrimination in the year before the survey (Pew Research Center, 2023).

Despite this, social interactions in India largely occur within caste boundaries. A majority indicate that their closest friends belong to their caste, with roughly a quarter exclusively having friends from their caste. Additionally, most people consider it crucial to prevent both men and women in their community from marrying outside their caste, although opinions on this vary significantly by region. For instance, about 82% in the Central region deem it very important to halt inter-caste marriages for men, while only 35% in the South share this strong sentiment against such marriages (Pew Research Center, 2023).

Caste Discrimination in Higher Education

Access to education serves as a powerful equaliser, challenging entrenched caste hierarchies by offering opportunities for upward mobility and social transformation. Recognising education's pivotal role in disrupting these norms becomes imperative for paving the way towards a more equitable and inclusive society (Paliwal, 2021).

However, these caste-based challenges also become hurdles towards ensuring equitable access to higher education. Students from marginalised communities, notably Dalits and Adivasis, encounter exclusion in both academic and non-academic domains within educational institutions.

Within the higher education system, the enrolment of these groups has increased, as highlighted in the AISHE report of 2021. The report stated that in 2020–21, 14.2% of enrolled students belonged to Scheduled Castes, 5.8% were from Scheduled Tribes, 35.8% represented Other Backward Classes, and the remaining 44.2% were from other communities.

Comparing growth rates, the enrolment of Scheduled Caste students in 2020–21 witnessed a 4.2% increase compared to the previous year. The cumulative increase in SC student enrolment since 2014–15 has been 27.96%. The number of Scheduled Tribe students increased to 24.1 lakh in 2020–21 from 21.6 lakh in 2019–20, marking an 11.9% increase. The overall increase in ST student enrolment since 2014–15 stands at 47%. Similarly, enrolment of students from Other Backward Classes rose to about 1.48 crore in 2020–21 from 1.42 crore in 2019–20, reflecting a 31.67% increase in OBC student enrolment since 2014–15 (Department of Higher Education, 2023).

However, a pressing concern persists regarding the notably lower literacy rates among these social groups compared to the broader Indian population. This discrepancy raises questions about the continued prevalence of hostility, oppression, and inherent flaws within educational institutions across Indian society.

Recent statements by Union Minister of State for Education Subhas Sarkar revealing the discontinuation of studies by 13,626 students belonging to SCs, STs, and OBCs, including those in prestigious institutions like IITs and IIMs, in the last five years, necessitate an exploration into the reasons behind such discontinuations (The Hindu Bureau, 2023). Numerous scholarly works and reports have extensively examined caste-based discrimination within the realm of Indian higher education.

Early on, these children bear the brunt of social segregation, corporal punishment, and humiliation, factors contributing significantly to the high rates of school dropout among them (Balagopalan & Subrahmanian, 2003; Nambissan, 2009). Consequently, the representation of these communities in higher educational institutions remains notably underwhelming.

The study titled “The Steady Drumbeat of Institutional Casteism” by multiple organisations in Maharashtra reveals the institutionalisation of casteism in Indian higher education, particularly in technical fields like medicine and engineering. It points out that discrimination goes unacknowledged, whether overt or subtle, ignoring caste-based biases. The report exposes various forms of casteism, such as abusive slurs, exclusion, and opposition to reservation policies. It labels the tragic suicides of Payal Tadvii and Rohit Vemula as “institutional murders,” highlighting the victim-blaming culture and apathy. The study emphasises the failure to recognise and address discrimination, hindering marginalised groups' experiences and affecting their education and lives. It advocates expanding reservations, incorporating humanities in technical education, and enacting anti-caste-based discrimination legislation for substantive equality (Forum against Oppression of Women et al., 2021).

The article by Kumar and Newman (2023) highlights the entrenched caste discrimination faced by marginalised students in academia, which is acknowledged by reports like the Prof. SK Thorat Committee (2007) and the Mungekar Committee (2012). Dalit students endure discrimination in various campus relationships—student-student, supervisor-student, and administration-student—facing harassment and humiliation based on their caste identity. Administrative delays further exacerbate their plight in areas like fellowships, impacting their academic journey.

This discrimination persists in esteemed Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) such as Hyderabad Central University, AIIMS, IITs, IIMs, and Vardhman Mahavir Medical College. Shockingly low representation of Dalit teaching faculty contributes to increased dropout rates among Dalit students.

The Ministry of Education data (2019) revealed that less than 3% of faculty across 23 IITs were from Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs).

The imminent privatisation of higher education, additionally, threatens to eradicate enforceable reservation policies, potentially limiting access to higher education for marginalised communities. Unchecked commercialisation may exacerbate poverty among these groups, reinforcing societal divides in a competitive job market dominated by privileged castes.

In another study within the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), a prominent engineering institution, Subramanian (2015) examined the concepts of merit and identity, drawing from Bourdieu's social and cultural capital framework. Subramanian's research revealed how students from Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes communities are often deemed less meritorious or intelligent, with "merit" reserved for those from upper castes. She underscored the historical privilege of upper castes as a foundational aspect of contemporary interpretations of merit.

The fact-finding report on "Expulsion of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes and Physically Disabled Students" from IIT Roorkee (Shobhna & Saini, 2015) highlighted discrimination in academic spheres, including assessment processes and institutional mechanisms that create pressure on Dalit-Adivasi students. These reports also depicted non-academic segregation and isolation based on caste in hostels, dining mess, sports, and cultural events. Peer interactions often involve caste-based abuse, exhibiting anti-reservation sentiments against beneficiaries of affirmative action policies (Kumar, 2016; Sabharwal & Malish, 2016; Shobhna & Saini, 2015; Sukumar, 2008; Thorat et al., 2007). These practices underscore how institutions of higher learning overlook the challenges faced by socially disadvantaged students.

Tragic Caste-related Incidents

One of the indications of ongoing discrimination is evident in the number of students resorting to taking their own lives. The contemporary discriminatory practices based on caste in educational institutions have tragically led to several Dalit students committing suicide across the country. In recent years, numerous student suicides have been associated with instances of caste discrimination and abuse, drawing attention to systemic issues within prominent academic institutions in India. Notably, these cases occurred at renowned establishments such as IITs and perceived liberal central universities (Sharma, 2023). Some accounts of such incidents include:

Darshan Solanki, an 18-year-old first-year chemical engineering student at IIT Bombay, died by suicide by jumping from the seventh floor of a building in February 2023. His death led to allegations of caste-based discrimination, with the Ambedkar Periyar Phule Study Circle (APPSC) stating that the lack of inclusivity and safety for Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasi students contributed to his demise. However, an internal investigation by IIT Bombay dismissed caste discrimination, highlighting Solanki's poor academic performance as a possible cause (Sharma, 2023).

In 2016, PhD scholar Rohith Vemula's suicide at the University of Hyderabad gained widespread attention. Before his death, Vemula and others were suspended from their hostel, sparking allegations of caste oppression. The incident fuelled discussions on discrimination against Dalit students, although controversies arose regarding Vemula's caste identity (Sharma, 2023).

Similarly, Payal Tadvi, a postgraduate medical student at BYL Nair Hospital in Mumbai, died by suicide in 2019, allegedly due to caste-based abuse by senior students belonging to upper castes. Her family's complaints to hospital authorities went unaddressed, ultimately leading to her tragic death (Sharma, 2023).

Jaspreet Singh, a final-year MBBS student, died by suicide at Government Medical College, Chandigarh, in 2008 after facing caste-based insults and repeated academic failure due to discrimination from a professor. Despite intervention, no action was taken against the professor (Andru, 2023).

Manish Kumar Guddolian, a student at IIT Roorkee, took his life due to caste-based harassment by peers and hostel authorities in 2011. Authorities attributed his death to academic pressure, but his parents highlighted the persistent caste-based abuse he endured (Andru, 2023).

Another case involved Senthil Kumar, a PhD scholar at the University of Hyderabad, who died by suicide in 2008 after facing caste-based discrimination. The Vinod Pavarala committee's investigation highlighted discrimination against marginalised students as a significant factor in his death (Sharma, 2023).

P. Raju, a Dalit student at the University of Hyderabad, died by suicide in 2013. Initially attributed to "love failure," a later fact-finding report indicated that caste and financial background played crucial roles in his alienation, along with several other reported suicides among students from marginalised communities (Sharma, 2023).

Another case involved Senthil Kumar, a PhD scholar at the University of Hyderabad, who died by suicide in 2008 after facing caste-based discrimination. The Vinod Pavarala committee's investigation highlighted discrimination against marginalised students as a significant factor in his death (Sharma, 2023).

P. Raju, a Dalit student at the University of Hyderabad, died by suicide in 2013. Initially attributed to “love failure,” a later fact-finding report indicated that caste and financial background played crucial roles in his alienation, along with several other reported suicides among students from marginalised communities (Sharma, 2023).

These distressing incidents shed light on the persistent challenges faced by marginalised students in educational institutions, emphasising the urgent need for systemic reforms and a more inclusive environment to prevent further tragedies.

Gender and Higher Education

Female enrolment in higher education programmes had increased to 49% of total enrolments in 2020–21 compared to 45% in 2019–20. The AISHE 2021 data reveals the enrolment statistics for various programs. The breakdown is as follows:

- Bachelors in Science (Hons): 587 lakhs total students, with 45% being female.
- Bachelors in Commerce: 43.22 lakhs total students, among which 48.5% are female.
- Bachelors in Technology: 23.20 lakhs total students, comprising 28.7% females.
- Bachelors in Engineering: 13.42 lakhs total students, with 28.5% being female.
- Bachelors in Science: 49.12 lakhs total students, where 52% are female.
- Bachelors in Business Administration: 6.37 lakhs enrolled, with 38% being female.
- Bachelors in Arts: 104 lakhs enrolled, among which 52% are female.
- Bachelors in Education: 14.38 lakhs enrolled, with 64% being female.
- Masters in Business Administration: 6.04 lakhs enrolled, with 43% female.
- Masters in Science: 8.60 lakhs enrolled, with 60% female.
- Masters in Arts: 17.35 lakhs enrolled, with 60% female.

Gender Disparities in Higher Education

Analysing the gender distribution across these programs, it is evident that some fields tend to have more female enrolment than others. For instance, BA, BSc, and BEd programs have higher female representation, with percentages surpassing 50% in most cases. Conversely, technical fields such as BTech and Bachelors in Engineering have notably lower percentages of female students, hovering around 28–29%. BBA and BCom fall in between, with varying but comparatively lower female representation than arts and education programs. These statistics highlight persistent gender imbalances across different academic disciplines. Factors such as societal stereotypes, perceived career prospects, and cultural biases might contribute to these disparities, influencing students' choices regarding their field of study.

At the PhD level, the AISHE data indicates that Engineering Technology and Science are the primary fields of study. While Engineering & Technology has a substantial number of PhD enrollees, there remains a gender gap with around 33.3% female representation. Conversely, the Science stream shows a higher percentage of female students, accounting for 48.8% of the total enrolment.

In India, the enrolment of women in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields outstrips that of some developed nations. Notably, 43% of female graduates in India are involved in tertiary-level STEM studies, surpassing percentages in the US (34%), UK (38%), and Germany (27%) (Swarup, 2023). Moreover, Indian women exhibit a significant presence in academic publications compared to their global counterparts. Despite this promising enrolment, it is crucial to note that this high percentage of enrolment must translate into actual employment opportunities and leadership positions.

Data from the National Science Foundation indicates a gap: while 52% of women pursue STEM courses, only 29% enter the STEM workforce. Further still, at the highest executive levels, a mere 3% of women hold CEO positions within the STEM industry (Swarup, 2023). Hence, while enrolment figures are encouraging, the transition of female graduates into the STEM workforce and their representation in top leadership remains significantly lower.

The underrepresentation of women in STEM fields is attributed not only to a lack of skills but also to deeply ingrained stereotypical gender roles. Women often grapple with a “dual role” syndrome, where societal expectations heavily influence their professional choices, adding to the challenges they face in these fields. Early societal stereotypes and cultural norms dissuade women from pursuing STEM subjects, complicating their entry and advancement in these domains.

To effectively increase the number of women in STEM fields, systemic changes are necessary. Overcoming biases that dissuade girls from considering STEM careers and establishing supportive work environments are crucial steps (Swarup, 2023). This involves offering empowering support mechanisms such as mentorship, skill development, leadership training, and ensuring equal opportunities for women.

The phenomenon of education not translating into employment is not unique to STEM fields but is also prevalent in general across India. Despite advancements in educational parity, female literacy rates, and lower fertility rates, female labour force participation (FLFP) remains disconcertingly low. By 2019, only one-fifth of the female population was engaged in the workforce, a figure that is among the lowest globally (Sharma, 2021).

Several factors contribute to this disparity, including social norms, deeply rooted gender roles, and limited access to childcare facilities. Traditional expectations often compel women to prioritise household duties over careers, and inadequate daycare facilities further hinder their workforce engagement.

To address these challenges, challenging societal norms and biases is essential. Initiatives should challenge traditional perceptions of women's roles, advocate for an inclusive workforce, and empower women through financial independence and better access to services.

A “Big Push” policy strategy is imperative to drive substantial change. This approach involves fostering gender-integrated workplaces, equalising parental leave policies, and offering accessible childcare facilities (Sharma, 2021). Overcoming societal barriers requires sustained efforts to reshape norms, provide better support structures, and create a conducive environment for women's workforce participation.

Transgender Community and Higher Education in India

Who Are the Transgender Individuals?

The terms “gender” and “sex” are commonly used interchangeably, but they hold distinct meanings. “Sex” refers to the biological attributes of humans and animals, encompassing physical traits, chromosomal structure, gene expression, hormones, and anatomy. Conversely, “gender” refers to socially constructed roles encompassing behaviours, expressions, and identities of males, females, and gender-diverse individuals (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2020). Typically, society recognises two genders—male and female—through the socialisation process.

However, besides these traditional categories, transgender individuals have been an integral part of Indian society for centuries. The term “transgender” serves as an umbrella term, describing individuals whose gender identity, expression, and behaviour do not align with the sex assigned to them at birth (American Psychological Association, 2023).

Transgender individuals encompass various identities. Additionally, there is a growing number of individuals who do not align with any specific gender category. Some third-gender individuals experience discomfort with societal gender roles, coupled with a deep feeling of discord between their physical body and internal sense of self. This bodily mismatch, known as body dysphoria, leads to significant distress, negatively affecting their daily life and well-being. To align their physical form with their inner identity, medical services are often necessary (Das, 2018).

The Historical Evolution of the Transgender Community in India

Transgender individuals have been an integral aspect of Indian society since the ancient period. . Historical evidence points to the recognition of a “third sex” or individuals not conforming strictly to binary male or female genders in the ancient writings of India. The concept of “tritiyaprakriti” or “napumsaka” was deeply embedded in Hindu mythology, folklore, epics, and early Vedic and Puranic literature. The term “napumsaka” was specifically used to describe the absence of procreative abilities, distinguishing these individuals from conventional masculine and feminine characteristics. Consequently, early texts extensively explored topics of sexuality and the well-established concept of a third gender within these narratives (Michelraj, 2015).

The portrayal of Mohini, the female incarnation of Vishnu in the Mahabharata, stands as the earliest reference to transgender individuals in Hindu mythology. Mohini's presence in various ancient texts, such as the Vishnu Purana and the Lingapurana, illustrates diverse perspectives on gender identity, including the merging of Shiva and Mohini (Vishnu) leading to Shankara-Narayanan's origins (Hariharan). Within the Ramayana, transgender persons awaited Lord Rama's return to the woods after his exile announcement. Their exclusion from the gender binary positioned them differently from “men and women.” The Mahabharata introduces characters like Aravan (the son of a snake) and Shikhandi, highlighting significant moments in transgender narratives.

During the Mughal era, persons belonging to the transgender community held influential roles as political advisors, administrators, and harem guardians, securing prominent positions in the royal courts.

Notably, figures like Itimad Khan were eunuch officers in Akbar's court, entrusted with administering state finances and amassing substantial wealth and power. European travellers to Mughal India acknowledged the wealth and privileges enjoyed by transgender individuals, marvelling at their lifestyle and status.

However, the colonial influence during British rule brought a shift in societal attitudes towards transgender individuals. The imposition of strict moral codes, including criminalising non-heteronormative sexual behaviours, led to a decline in societal respect for the transgender community (Ariba, 2023).

Policies and Enactments

In contemporary India, significant legal strides occurred with the Supreme Court's recognition of transgender individuals as the "third gender" in the landmark NALSA judgment of April 2014. The judgment directed governments to address issues like societal stigma, ensuring the constitutional rights of transgender individuals. The 2014 Supreme Court ruling acknowledged the equal rights of transgender individuals under the law, granting legal recognition. In addition to the rights to marriage and inheritance, they were entitled to job and educational reservations as per the Supreme Court's decision (Ariba, 2023).

The 2014 ruling prompted changes in educational approaches. The Department of Women's Studies at NCERT became the Department of Gender Studies, addressing transgender children's concerns. The government later passed the Transgender Person (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, safeguarding their rights in employment, education, and health services. Now, transgender people in India have the right to change their legal gender post-sex reassignment surgery and identify as the third gender. The Act ensures their admission to schools and colleges as a "disadvantaged group," with 25% reservation for economically disadvantaged and underprivileged students (Ganguli, 2023).

In line with the Constitution, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 advocates for a Gender Inclusion Fund (GIF) to provide fair education for females and transgender students. Schools are urged to respect transgender students' gender identity, offering gender-neutral facilities and using correct names/pronouns. The NEP prioritises character development, aiming to cultivate ethical, empathetic learners and create a school culture inclusive of all, especially vulnerable groups like transgender students (Ganguli, 2023).

The NEP underlines the need to sensitise educators and students to ensure respect, dignity, and privacy for all, crucial for transgender individuals. Early education on ethical decision-making is highlighted, essential for transgender children who often face isolation or abuse, leading to dropping out. The NEP acknowledges transgender people as a neglected Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Group (SDG) in education. It proposes innovative education centres to support reintegrating children who left school due to various reasons, benefiting transgender children particularly. The policy aims to address issues faced by transgender children in education, striving for tailored solutions through close monitoring of participation and cognitive abilities (Ganguli, 2023).

Nonetheless, activists highlight that despite these legal and policy advancements, instances of abuse and exploitation persist within the community. These roadblocks include notions such as the scrapping of provisions, including horizontal reservations, in the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act amendments in December 2019. Furthermore, Karnataka emerged as the first state to introduce 1% reservation for trans persons in employment; broader inclusion remains a work in progress, particularly for marginalised transgender individuals from Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasi (DBA) communities, as highlighted by Sudipta Das, a Dalit-queer feminist writer (Ariba, 2023).

Challenges Faced by the Transgender Community

The challenges faced by the transgender community, as highlighted by the 2011 census, reveal a concerning literacy rate of 56.1%, significantly lower than the national average of 74.04%. Contributing to this issue is the absence of inclusive and welcoming environments within schools and universities, as reported by the Centre for Law and Policy Research in 2022.

These challenges manifest in multiple forms for transgender individuals, ranging from familial denial and aggression to verbal and physical abuse, isolation, and rejection. Stigmatisation and discrimination severely curtail opportunities for education due to societal non-acceptance, leading to schooling difficulties and high dropout rates. Even when enrolled, transgender students frequently face harassment and bullying, resulting in discontinuation of education. Challenges extend beyond academia; housing, roommate issues, and employment prospects in fields such as medicine or law exacerbate the situation. The absence of transgender-tailored hostels and the lack of clarity in government resolutions further compound the challenges faced by transgender students seeking equal opportunities in education (Balu, 2020; Srivastava, 2023).

In the year 2019, regarding the specific data inquiry made by Congress MP Anumula Revanth Reddy, Minister of Human Resource Development Ramesh Pokhriyal "Nishank" disclosed that, except for Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) with an enrolment of 814 transgender students over the last five years, other central universities reported no transgender students or staff. This stands in contrast to the All-India Survey on Higher Education 2018–19, which did not include statistics on transgender individuals among the 37.4 million total enrollees in higher education across various institutions. It is also argued that while the University Grants Commission (UGC) has initiated steps to enhance their participation in higher education, such as incorporating a transgender category in application forms and advocating for their inclusion in scholarships and research projects, gaps in representation persist (Agha, 2019).

Professor Rajesh Kumar of Delhi University's Transgender Resource Centre pointed out that government-provided statistics do not fully portray the reality. He highlighted the reluctance of transgender individuals to identify themselves as a different gender due to societal stigma and the gradual process required for their integration into higher education. Kumar emphasised that the first step towards their inclusion is their enrolment under the transgender category, underscoring the need for sensitisation and gradual inclusion efforts. Kumar also critiqued the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill 2019, which restricts a transgender person's right to self-identify.

He emphasised that the legislation falls short in empowering and ensuring comfort with their identity among the marginalised community, with protests against the ambiguous discrimination clause. Furthermore, Kumar highlighted the need for legislation focused on empowering and affirming the identities of transgender individuals rather than relying solely on external certifications, as the current bill demands (Agha, 2019).

Recent news also highlights the challenges faced by transgender individuals in higher education, particularly in Pune. It was reported in December 2023 that out of the city's top ten institutes, only Savitribai Phule Pune University (SPPU) has enrolled 41 transgender students across its campuses, while nine other institutions have no transgender students. Recent government announcements to sponsor higher education costs for transgender students in public universities and affiliated colleges have yet to significantly impact enrolment figures despite indications of a higher transgender population compared to those enrolled in educational institutions (Srivastava, 2023). Efforts such as including a "TG" category in application forms and considering alternative accommodation arrangements have been made by educational institutions but fall short of fostering a truly supportive environment for transgender students in education, necessitating more proactive measures (Srivastava, 2023).

Need for Inclusive Strategies for the Transgender Community

The transgender community faces severe marginalisation and vulnerability, particularly concerning key human development indices, notably in the education and employment sectors. Rectifying this situation necessitates a comprehensive approach aimed at eradicating stigma and discrimination through heightened awareness and the effective implementation of laws. By addressing these societal issues at an early stage, the goal is to facilitate the inclusion of transgender children into the educational system and ensure their retention through higher levels of education.

Addressing the educational challenges encountered by the transgender community requires a comprehensive and nuanced strategy. This multifaceted approach commences with a firm advocacy for equal access to education across all levels, demanding affirmative actions that actively combat prevalent stigmatisation and discrimination. Educational institutions, encompassing schools and colleges, bear a significant responsibility in nurturing a supportive and inclusive environment. This involves not only acceptance through initiatives like respecting preferred pronouns and ensuring access to appropriate facilities, such as gender-neutral restrooms but also providing mental health counselling by specialised experts. Establishing anti-harassment and anti-discrimination cells within these institutions is also imperative (Ganguly & Dutta, 2021).

Simultaneously, there is a pressing need to sensitise broader society, which includes parents, educators, and students, to foster an environment that embraces and welcomes transgender individuals within educational settings. Achieving this requires parallel efforts that promote awareness, understanding, and acceptance, ensuring that educational environments become genuinely inclusive and supportive spaces for transgender individuals (Sundara Raj, 2019).

Understanding the dynamics of dropout rates among transgender persons is crucial. These individuals often face forced dropout situations due to acute discrimination and abuse, highlighting the urgent need to redefine perceptions and implement structural reforms. Policy review and reform are imperative to eliminate structural constraints and legal barriers that hinder the mainstream education access of transgender individuals (Sundara Raj, 2019). Simultaneously, safeguarding transgender youth from hostile school environments demands immediate attention. Government intervention is crucial in creating conducive environments within educational institutions for transgender children. Lastly, schools must understand and uphold their legal responsibilities under equality acts, ensuring comprehensive training for staff to understand and comply with all directives, especially those concerning transgender and gender variant children. Hence, these recommendations aim to foster an inclusive educational environment vital for the growth and development of transgender individuals (Sundara Raj, 2019).

Persons with Disabilities and Higher Education

Disability encompasses a wide spectrum of conditions affecting body or mind functions, making specific activities challenging and limiting interaction with the world. There is diversity within the disabled community, with varying needs and experiences, even among those with the same disability type (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.).

The World Health Organization identifies disability through impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions, which encompass a broad range of conditions, whether present from birth, developed during childhood, resulting from injuries, chronic conditions, or other factors. It covers various health conditions associated with disability and explains impairments as differences or absence in body structures or functions, distinguishing between structural and functional impairments. Furthermore, it clarifies the difference between activity limitations (difficulties in task execution) and participation restrictions (challenges in engaging in life situations) (World Health Organisation, 2001).

In India, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act of 2016, describes a “person with disability” as an individual confronting enduring physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments. These impairments, when compounded by societal barriers, serve as obstacles hindering such persons' full and equitable participation in society alongside others.

Furthermore, the Act defines a “person with benchmark disability” as someone with a minimum of 40% of a specified disability. This term applies both to disabilities lacking specific, measurable terms and those that possess measurable definitions. Certification of such disabilities is granted by an authoritative certifying body, validating the individual's status.

The Act's comprehensive scope encompasses 21 disabilities, incorporating conditions such as blindness, low vision, leprosy-cured individuals, hearing impairment, locomotor disability, dwarfism, intellectual disability, mental illness, autism spectrum disorder, cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, chronic neurological conditions, specific learning disabilities, multiple sclerosis, speech and language disability, thalassemia, haemophilia, sickle cell disease, multiple disabilities including deaf-blindness, individuals affected by acid attacks, and those dealing with Parkinson's disease. These disabilities collectively represent a diverse range of conditions that the Act recognises and seeks to address within its provisions and support structures (Office of the State Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities, Government of Meghalaya, n.d.).

Disability in India

As per the Census of India of 2011, 2.21% of India's populace constitutes individuals with disabilities. The Indian Constitution guarantees equality and liberty and prohibits discrimination based on various factors, but it lacks explicit recognition for persons with disabilities (PwDs). The emergence of the disability rights movement in India can be traced back to the Proclamation on the Full Participation and Equality of People with Disabilities, which ultimately led to the enactment of The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act in 1995. This legal milestone was the result of extensive efforts led by Senior Advocate S. K. Rungta and the National Federation of the Blind (Chacko, 2022).

Over time, a noticeable shift has occurred from a charitable approach to a rights-based perspective in delineating and enforcing the statutory rights of persons with disabilities. Another significant development has been the transition from the medical model of disability, as envisioned in the 1995 Act, to the social model of disability along with a human rights approach. This shift gained prominence following the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the subsequent enactment of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPWD Act) in 2016. On a global scale, the Incheon Strategy for Disability Inclusiveness also contributed to the implementation of the 2016 Act (Chacko, 2022).

The RPWD Act of 2016 was established to safeguard the rights of disabled individuals. Section 32 of this Act mandates that all government higher educational institutions reserve a minimum of 5% of seats for “persons with benchmark disabilities.” Moreover, Section 16 of the Act necessitates government-recognised and funded educational institutions to deliver inclusive education to disabled students and ensure the accessibility of their campuses (Bansal, 2019).

Policies for Persons with Disabilities in India

The current strategies and policies aimed at integrating Persons with Disabilities (PWD) into higher education in India signify a concerted effort by the government to ensure comprehensive developmental progress inclusive of all segments of society.

One significant program, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), launched by the Government of India, targets elementary education for all children aged 6–14. Although not directly linked to higher education, SSA aims to empower students with disabilities by providing them with quality foundational education. The initiative aims to bridge educational gaps and offer equitable learning opportunities to children, irrespective of their socio-economic background, caste, gender, or physical abilities (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2017).

Another noteworthy program, the Higher Education for Persons with Special Needs (HEPSN), concentrates on establishing enabling units in colleges. These units aid in admission processes, provide counselling sessions, and raise awareness about the needs of differently abled individuals in higher education. Additionally, they work towards offering barrier-free access to infrastructure and providing special equipment to enhance educational services for PWD (University Grants Commission, n.d.).

The Saksham Scholarship Scheme, administered by the All-India Council of Technical Education (AICTE), encourages and supports 1000 differently abled students annually in pursuing technical education (All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), n.d.).

Furthermore, initiatives like the Reservation in Admissions, Inclusive Education for Disabled at Secondary Stage (IEDSS) (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2015), and the Rajiv Gandhi Fellowship Scheme aim to ensure inclusive access, support, and opportunities for higher education among persons with disabilities (Vikaspedia, 2020).

Beyond specific programs, India's Five-Year Plans reflect a shift from a welfare-based to a rights-based approach towards individuals with disabilities. Legislation such as the Persons with Disabilities Act 1995, National Trust for Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation, and Multiple Disabilities Act 1999, and Rehabilitation Council of India Act 1992 underscore this rights-based perspective, emphasising education, employment, and creating an enabling environment for persons with disabilities (Zuber & Ramakrishna, 2021).

The Tenth and Eleventh Five Year Plans gave particular emphasis on financial support and developmental measures aimed at enhancing education and opportunities for students with disabilities, contributing to the advancement of inclusive higher education in India. Additionally, policies like the National Action Plan for Inclusive Education of Children and Youth with Disabilities (IECYD) 2005 and Teachers Preparation in Special Education (TEPSE) strive to eliminate barriers and promote inclusivity in higher education for individuals with disabilities (Zuber & Ramakrishna, 2021).

However, it is asserted that, regrettably, the lack of adherence to these provisions has failed to make these measures effectively combat the entrenched systemic and structural exclusion of disabled individuals from higher education (Bansal, 2019).

Barriers to Higher Education for Persons with Disabilities

Education is universally regarded as an inherent entitlement for every individual, a fundamental right underscored by both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and enshrined within the Indian Constitution. Aligned with the fourth goal of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, there is a global commitment to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all. Given that India boasts one of the largest higher education systems globally, measured by the number of educational institutions, the imperative to honour this commitment to education becomes paramount in steering our diverse nation towards the path of social justice.

In India, children with special needs (CwSN) have historically needed more options, particularly in pursuing higher education. Despite the provisions of 5% reservation of seats in higher education institutions set forth in the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act of 2016, intended for accommodating CwSN, the actual enrolment of students with disabilities remains dishearteningly low (TNN, 2023).

According to the All-India Survey on Higher Education report for 2020–21, 79,035 PwD students were enrolled across various higher educational institutions, constituting just 1.9% of their total population within the 20–29 age group (based on the 2011 census updated in 2016). Out of the 79,035 PwD students, 49,334 are male and 29,701 are female students. Notably, while the enrolment of PwD in higher education has increased overall from 7067 in 2016 to 79035 in 2020, it has shown a decline for female students with disabilities from 30073 in 2016–17 to 29701 in 2020–21.

Even prominent higher educational institutions in India, equipped with established infrastructure and a reservation system supporting students with disabilities, often find themselves reassigning seats designated for PwD due to a lack of applicants. In the academic year 2021–22, for instance, 12 seats reserved for PwD students in IITs alone were converted into community category seats (TNN, 2023).

Despite institutional efforts to publicise opportunities for PwD, their outreach tends to predominantly impact students from urban areas hailing from well-educated family backgrounds. Conversely, students in rural areas, particularly first-generation graduates, remain unaware of these opportunities, thus widening the accessibility gap for higher education among different demographics. Several factors contribute to this trend of the education gap.

Students with disabilities encounter a myriad of challenges within the landscape of higher education in India, as highlighted across various scholarly papers. The impediments they face span diverse dimensions, deeply impacting their educational experiences and subsequent opportunities. Central to these challenges are the profound limitations within physical infrastructure. The absence of essential facilities, such as ramps, elevators, accessible transportation, and disability-friendly toilets, severely constrains the mobility and accessibility of students with disabilities within educational institutions (Ahmad, 2018).

Moreover, these challenges are compounded by delays in accommodation processes and the provision of specialised educational services. This delay further marginalised students with disabilities, hindering their academic progress and integration into the education system (Zuber & Ramakrishna, 2021). The labelling of disabilities as weaknesses within funding schemes exacerbates their exclusion from higher education spaces, perpetuating negative perceptions and attitudes towards individuals with disabilities (Ahmad, 2018).

The literature also underscores the insufficiency of specialised resources and support services. The absence of adequately trained teachers, infrastructural accessibility gaps, and the unavailability of assistive educational materials, such as braille or digital textbooks, directly impede the educational journey of students with disabilities (Zuber & Ramakrishna, 2021). These deficiencies not only affect their academic performance but also limit their prospects for future advancement. This educational gap, which is being created, significantly limits their employment prospects, exacerbating the cycle of exclusion and limited opportunities.

The stark contrast between the employment rates of people with disabilities (36.3%) compared to those without disabilities (78%) is alarming. This discrepancy can be attributed to the unsupportive learning environments that hinder academic achievement and subsequently limit desirable job opportunities for individuals with disabilities (Zuber & Ramakrishna, 2021).

Although government initiatives, including specific schemes and reserved seats, aim to increase the enrolment of students with disabilities in higher education, these efforts fall short of addressing the comprehensive challenges faced by these individuals (Zuber & Ramakrishna, 2021).

In essence, the collective findings of these papers highlight the urgent need for a holistic approach to address the multifaceted challenges faced by students with disabilities in higher education in India. Addressing physical infrastructure limitations, tailored educational approaches, negative attitudes, and the provision of adequate support services are imperative steps toward fostering an inclusive and empowering educational environment for all individuals, regardless of their abilities. Policies must prioritise the rights and unique needs of students with disabilities in higher education to foster meaningful inclusion and empowerment.

Way Forward: Intersectional Perspective for Education

Kimberlé Crenshaw, a law professor at Columbia and University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), coined the term intersectionality to describe how people's social identities can intersect and overlap. She likened it to a lens or prism through which we see how different forms of inequality often operate together and worsen each other. Discussions on inequality typically address race, gender, class, sexuality, or immigrant status separately. What has frequently been overlooked is how certain individuals may experience discrimination based on all these factors simultaneously, and their experience is not merely a collection of these individual parts but rather a complex interweaving of these various aspects (Steinmetz, 2020).

Viswambaran and Diwakar (2021), in their paper “Intersectionality and inclusive education: the missing piece of the jigsaw puzzle” asserted that while originally rooted in the mapping of intersections between race and gender, the concept of intersectionality has transcended disciplinary boundaries, finding application in various fields according to the needs of scholars (Jiménez-Castellanos & García, 2017). For instance, within the realm of education, employing intersectionality allows for a comprehensive understanding of how diverse identity markers, including but not limited to gender, (dis)ability, race, class, and migrant background, intersect and influence a learner's educational journey (Grant & Zwier, 2011).

Existing research shows that using an intersectional approach in education brings additional advantages. Whether examining participation rates, educational achievements, identification of students' requirements, or perspectives on future aspirations, an intersectional research framework facilitates the refinement of policies. Although relatively uncommon, certain nations have initiated the integration of an intersectional framework into education by reallocating resources, customising teaching methods, implementing monitoring and evaluations, and enhancing counselling services (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2023).

However, employing an intersectional perspective presents challenges within various academic disciplines due to its limited integration and varying definitions. Translation of the term “intersectionality” into languages other than English poses difficulties. Additionally, policymakers and researchers frequently need more pertinent data that is essential for conducting intersectional analyses. Moreover, the existing data often need more quantity or quality concerning diverse groups of interest. For example, only a few datasets exist that comprehensively consider the intersection of sexual orientation and gender identity with other facets of diversity (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2023).

Nevertheless, embracing an intersectional perspective is necessary for research endeavours and policy formulations to effectively recognise, represent, or respond to the needs of individuals with overlapping identities (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2023). Hence, understanding and embracing intersectionality within education holds profound importance for several compelling reasons. Firstly, intersectionality acknowledges the intricate nature of individuals' social identities, recognising that these identities intersect, intertwine, and collectively shape an individual's experiences. Educators benefit from this nuanced understanding by steering clear of oversimplification and ensuring that every student's distinctive perspective is not only acknowledged but also validated (Black, 2023).

Moreover, intersectionality sheds crucial light on the interlocking systems of oppression, demonstrating how various forms of discrimination, such as racism, sexism, and ableism, intersect and compound one another. By addressing these interconnected systems of oppression within the educational framework, institutions strive to cultivate a more inclusive and equitable learning environment. This approach aims to dismantle barriers that hinder students' opportunities for learning and personal growth, fostering an environment where all individuals feel valued and respected (Black, 2023).

Furthermore, integrating an intersectional approach into the curriculum becomes imperative. Educators are encouraged to infuse diverse perspectives, histories, and experiences into the teaching materials. This inclusive curriculum not only allows students to see themselves reflected in their studies but also nurtures a more comprehensive understanding of the world. It promotes empathy, respect, and appreciation for the diversity that exists within society (Black, 2023).

An intersectional education also plays a pivotal role in cultivating empathy and understanding among students. By exposing them to diverse viewpoints and experiences, this approach fosters empathy and encourages critical thinking. It stimulates constructive dialogue and respectful engagement with different perspectives, thereby contributing significantly towards a more inclusive and tolerant society (Black, 2023).

In essence, the integration of intersectionality within education is fundamental to establishing an inclusive, equitable, and empowering learning environment. By acknowledging and valuing students' intersecting identities and experiences, educators and policy makers contribute significantly to the creation of a fairer, more just, and more inclusive society.

References

- Agha, E. (2019, December 4). No transgender students in India's central varsities, indicates govt data. But here's the "other" side. News18.
<https://www.news18.com/news/india/no-transgender-students-in-indias-central-universities-govt-data-indicates-but-theres-the-other-side-2410993.html>
- Ahmad, W. (2018). Higher education for persons with disabilities in India: Challenges and concerns. Research Gate.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325619759_Higher_Education_for_Persons_with_Disabilities_in_India_Challenges_and_Concerns
- All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE). (n.d.). Saksham scholarship. <https://www.aicte-india.org/schemes/students-development-schemes/Saksham/General-Instructions>
- American Psychological Association. (2023, June 6). Understanding transgender people, gender identity and gender expression. <https://www.apa.org/topics/lgbtq/transgender-people-gender-identity-gender-expression>
- Andru, N. (2023, July 19). Caste in campus leading to suicide? Dalit History. <https://dalithistory.in/caste-in-campus-leading-to-suicide/>
- Ariba. (2023, July 10). Explained: A brief history of India's transgender community. The Indian Express. <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-culture/starbucks-history-transgender-community-india-8616767/>
- Balagopalan S., & Subrahmanian R. (2003). Dalit and adivasi children in schools: Some preliminary research themes and findings. IDS Bulletin, 34(1), 43–54.
- Balu, A. (2020, February 1). Confront issues on education of transgenders in India. Global Journal for research analysis, 9(2) <https://www.worldwidejournals.com/global-journal-for-research-analysis-GJRA/article/confront-issues-on-education-of-transgenders-in-india/MTQyNjc=/?is=1&b1=5&k=2>
- Bansal, A. (2019, January 10). Affirmative action without accessibility: India's higher education system fails disabled students | OxHRH blog. Oxford Human Rights Hub. <https://ohrh.law.ox.ac.uk/affirmative-action-without-accessibility-indias-higher-education-system-fails-disabled-students/>
- Basant, R., & Sen, G. (2010). Who participates in higher education in India? Rethinking the role of affirmative action. Economic and Political Weekly, 45(39), 62–70. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25742122>
- Black, D. (2023, May 29). The importance of intersectionality in education. Dope Black. <https://dopeblack.org/importance-of-intersectionality-in-education/>

Mitchell, T. (2023, October 13). How religion may affect educational attainment. Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2016/12/13/how-religion-may-affect-educational-attainment-scholarly-theories-and-historical-background/>

Mittal, A. M. (2016, September 30). The logical Indian.

<https://thelogicalindian.com/story-feed/awareness/caste-system-and-untouchability-in-india/>

Nambissan G. B. (2009). Exclusion and discrimination in schools: Experiences of Dalit children. Indian Institute of Dalit Studies and UNICEF.

Office of the State Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities, Government of Meghalaya. (n.d.). Definition of disability. Office of the State Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities, Government of Meghalaya. <https://megscpwd.gov.in/disability-def.html#:~:text=%22Person%20with%20disability%22%20means%20a,in%20society%20equally%20with%20others.>

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2023). Intersectionality in education: Rationale and practices to address the needs of students' intersecting identities. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. [https://one.oecd.org/document/EDU/WKP\(2023\)17/en/pdf](https://one.oecd.org/document/EDU/WKP(2023)17/en/pdf)

Paliwal, P. (2021, July 13). Caste and education in India: Linkages, promises, and obstacles. SPRF. <https://sprf.in/caste-and-education-in-india-linkages-promises-and-obstacles/>

Pew Research Center. (2023, September 19). Attitudes about caste in India. Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/06/29/attitudes-about-caste/>

PRS Legislative Research. (2006). Summary of Sachar Committee Report. https://prsindia.org/files/policy/policy_committee_reports/1242304423--Summary%20of%20Sachar%20Committee%20Report.pdf

Sabharwal N. S., & Malish C. M. (2016). Student diversity and civic learning in higher education in India. Centre for Policy Research in Higher Education (CPRHE), National University of Educational Planning and Administration.

Sabrang India. (2023, June 1). AISHE survey shows drop in enrolment of Muslim students in higher studies. NewsClick. <https://www.newsclick.in/aishe-survey-shows-drop-enrolment-muslim-students-higher-studies>

Sebastian, J. (2019). Under representation of Muslims in higher education: How and why the Kerala story is somewhat different? VikasAnvesh Foundation. <https://www.vikasanvesh.in/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Why-is-Kerala-Story-Different.pdf>

Shariff, A. (2016, November 18). Constitution for inclusive policies. The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/Constitution-for-inclusive-policies/article13614901.ece>

employment in India. Business Insider.

<https://www.businessinsider.in/india/article/heres-why-womens-education-doesnt-translate-to-employment-in-india/slidelist/81602254.cms>

Sharma, M. (2023, March 21). Caste in campus: From Rohith Vemula to Darshan Solanki, caste discrimination linked to student suicides. <https://www.outlookindia.com/.https://www.outlookindia.com/national/caste-in-campus-from-rohith-vemula-to-darshan-solanki-caste-discrimination-linked-to-student-suicides-news-271929>

Shobhna N. D., & Saini S. (2015). 'Excellence through expulsion': A case of arbitrary merit vs. constitutional mandate. National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights National Dalit Movement for Justice. Round Table India. <https://www.roundtableindia.co.in/excellence-through-expulsion-a-case-of-arbitrary-merit-vs-constitutional-mandate/>

Singh, S. S. (2023, February 4). Telangana, Kerala, West Bengal enrolled more Muslim students in 2020–21. <https://www.thehindu.com/education/wb-telangana-kerala-buck-national-trend-record-higher-enrollment-of-muslim-students-as-per-aishe-2020-21/article66470911.ece#:~:text=for%20higher%20education.,According%20to%20the%20report%2C%20the%20proportion%20of%20Muslim%20students%20enrolling,in%20the%20subsequent%20academic%20year.>

Srivastava, D. (2023, December 9). Trans students in higher education: Low numbers, non-existent facilities in Pune's institutes. The Indian Express.

<https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/pune/trans-students-in-higher-education-low-numbers-non-existent-facilities-9060656/>

Steinmetz, K. (2020, February 20). She coined the term “Intersectionality” over 30 years ago. Here's what it means to her today. TIME. <https://time.com/5786710/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality/>

Subramanian A. (2015). Making merit: The Indian Institutes of Technology and the social life of caste. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 57(2), 291–322.

Sukumar N. (2008). Living a concept: Semiotics of everyday exclusion. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 43(46), 14–17.

Swarup, R. (2023, March 23). More Indian women in STEM but few are becoming leaders. Hard to retain them in workforce. ThePrint. <https://theprint.in/opinion/more-indian-women-are-in-stem-but-few-becoming-leaders-hard-to-retain-them-in-workforce/1465982/>

The Hindu Bureau. (2023, August 3). Pre-matric scholarship for minority students was discontinued based on “cogent reasons”: Union Minister Smriti Irani in Parliament. The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/pre-matric-scholarship-for-minority-students-was-discontinued-based-on-cogent-reasons-union-minister-smriti-irani/article67153512.ece>

The Hindu Bureau. (2023, December 11). TNCC slams BJP govt. over caste discrimination in higher education institutions. The Hindu.

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/bjp-govt-nurturing-caste-discrimination-in-higher-education-institutes-tncc-sc-dept-head-mp-ranjan-kumar/article67628217.ece>

Thorat S., Shayamaprasad K. M., & Srivastava R. K. (2007). Report of the committee to enquire into the allegation of differential treatment of SC/ST students in All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Delhi. Government of India.

TNN. (2023, December 3). Making the right to higher education truly inclusive. The Times of India. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/making-the-right-to-higher-education-truly-inclusive/articleshow/105708160.cms>

University Grants Commission. (2013). Nurturing social equity in higher education. https://www.ugc.gov.in/pdfnews/7580771_NurturingSocialEquityinHigherEducation.pdf

Vikaspedia. (2020). Rajiv Gandhi National Fellowship (RGNF). <https://vikaspedia.in/education/policies-and-schemes/scholarships/scholarship-for-students-with-disabilities/national-fellowship-for-students-with-disabilities>

Viswambaran, V., & Diwakar, D. (2021). Intersectionality and inclusive education: The missing piece of the jigsaw puzzle. ResearchGate. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/354922122_Intersectionality_and_Inclusive_education_The_missing_piece_of_the_jigsaw_puzzle

World Health Organisation. (2001). International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF). World Health Organization. <https://www.who.int/classifications/international-classification-of-functioning-disability-and-health>

Zuber, M., & Ramakrishna, P. (2021, January 1). Challenges encountered by persons with disabilities in accessing higher education in India. <https://jcdee.com/index.php/jcdee/article/view/13>

Our Publications

- Gender and Inclusion Series
- Citizenship Series
- Aata Hai Yaad Mujko Guzra Hua Zamana
- Muslims in Uttar Pradesh
- India's Infrastructure Challenges
- Journal of Development Policy and Practice
- Alfaz Ki Mehfil - Edition I, II, and III
- Introduction to International Finance
- Wajood-e- Muslim
- Indian Muslims
- Agriculture in Telangana
- Daman-e-Gulchein

Series – 2022

- Situating Development of Muslims in Uttar Pradesh
- Education Challenges: Quality and Inclusion
- How Healthy is our Young Population?
- Muslim Women Tackling Vulnerability and Marginalisation

Series – 2023

- Internet Control and the Rise of Discrimination in India
- Agriculture in Telangana: from Plight to Pride
- The World's Biggest Country: India's Demographic Trajectory and Its Impact on Muslims, the Parliament, and the Labour Market
- From Speech to Action: Exploring Hate Speech Origins, Impact, and Interventions from Multidisciplinary Perspectives

The CDPP brings out a quarterly working paper based on the research work being carried out here. These are published on our website www.cdpp.co.in and sent to a select group for review, comments, and critique.



CENTRE FOR DEVELOPMENT POLICY AND PRACTICE

Serene Heights Building, #10-3-303, Masab Tank,
Hyderabad-500028, T.S., India

info@cdpp.co.in | www.cdpp.co.in | +91 9391581698