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Inclusive Higher Education and the Persistence of Access Inequities Among Socio Economically Disadvantaged Communities in India

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Abstract

The advanced education system in India has been witnessing a rapid-fire growth, with an registration Inclusive advanced education has come an important thing in India's educational policy, especially after the expansion of universities, reservation programs, literacy, and government weal schemes. These measures aim to give equal openings for scholars from socio- economically underprivileged communities similar as slated gentries(SCs), slated lines(STs), Other Backward Classes(OBCs), nonages, pastoral populations, and economically weaker sections. Despite these sweats, significant inequalities in access to advanced education still persist. numerous scholars from marginalized backgrounds face walls similar as poverty, lack of quality training, limited access to digital coffers, social demarcation, language difficulties, and shy academic support. The gap between policy intentions and factual issues highlights the structural challenges within the Indian education system. While registration in advanced education has increased in recent times, scholars from underprivileged groups frequently struggle to enter prestigious institutions, complete their education, and access employment openings after scale. Factors similar as indigenous difference, gender inequalities, fiscal constraints, and limited mindfulness about educational openings further consolidate these injuries. Inclusive advanced education thus requires further than just adding the number of institutions or seats. It demands probative literacy surroundings, fiscal backing, mentoring programs, bettered academy medication, and programs that address social and profitable walls faced by marginalized scholars. Strengthening institutional support systems and promoting social addition within premises can help reduce these inequalities. This study highlights the continuing challenges of access to advanced education among socio- economically underprivileged communities in India and emphasizes the need for further effective and inclusive educational programs. Addressing these inequalities is essential for achieving social justice, equal occasion, and sustainable public development.

Keywords: Inclusive Higher Education, Access Inequality, Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Communities, Educational Policy, Social Inclusion.

Introduction

A nation's growth in intellectual, economic, and social areas is shaped by its higher education system. It aids individuals in acquiring new knowledge, honing their professional skills, and improving their job prospects. In a diverse country like India, higher education is a crucial instrument for promoting social mobility and equality. It enables people from varied social and economic backgrounds to elevate their living standards and play a more significant role in national development. Yet, despite considerable advancements in expanding educational institutions and enrollment rates, access to higher education in India remains unequal, particularly for socio-economically disadvantaged groups. Inclusive higher education refers to a system that offers equal opportunities to all students, regardless of socioeconomic status, caste, gender, disability, or location. Its primary aim is to ensure no student is deprived of education due to social or financial hurdles. In recent years, equity and inclusion in higher education have been focal points in Indian policies and reforms. The government has introduced measures like reservation policies,

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scholarships, and special financial assistance programs to aid students from economically disadvantaged groups such as Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC), women, rural populations, and economically weak sections. These initiatives aim to make education more equitable and balanced.

India possesses one of the largest higher education systems worldwide, with millions of students attending colleges and universities across the nation. The number of higher education institutions and enrollment has surged over the last few decades, leading to what is known as the "massification" of higher education, making it accessible to a broader segment of society rather than just the elite. However, merely expanding institutions does not guarantee equal access. Various economic, social, and structural barriers still hinder several social groups from enrolling in and completing higher education. Socioeconomic disparities significantly challenge India's efforts in making higher education accessible to all. Students from low-income families often find it difficult to cover higher education costs, including tuition, accommodation, transportation, and study materials. Even with financial aid, indirect costs such as lost income from working or caring for family members can deter students from pursuing higher education. These economic barriers affect students from rural areas and marginalized communities more acutely, limiting their opportunities for academic advancement.

The divide between urban and rural areas also plays a crucial role in higher education inequality. Urban regions have a higher concentration of educational institutions, while rural areas often have limited access to quality institutions. Rural students face additional challenges like long travel distances, inadequate infrastructure, and scarce educational opportunities. Studies reveal significantly higher participation in higher education in urban areas compared to rural areas, emphasizing the ongoing regional access gap.

In India, social stratification based on caste, class, and gender also significantly influences access to higher education. Communities like SCs and STs have faced historical discrimination and exclusion from educational institutions for generations. While reservation policies and affirmative action have improved representation for these groups in higher education, inequalities persist. Many students from marginalized communities, as first-generation learners, may lack the academic support, resources, and guidance necessary for succeeding in higher education.

Gender inequality represents another facet of access disparities in higher education. Despite significant increases in female enrollment over time, many girls and women, particularly from rural and disadvantaged backgrounds, still face social and cultural obstacles to continuing their studies. Concerns about safety, household duties, and early marriage often deter young women from pursuing higher education. These challenges underscore the need for gender-sensitive policies and supportive educational environments. Recently, the Indian government has initiated several policy reforms to tackle these inequalities.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes equity and inclusion in education, recognizing education as a vital tool for economic and social progress. The policy highlights the need for specialized financial support, improved infrastructure, flexible learning paths, and inclusive teaching methods for Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs). It also urges colleges and universities to create an environment where all students feel valued and supported regardless of their background.

Despite these policy efforts, inclusive higher education in India continues to face numerous structural and institutional challenges. Many educational institutions lack sufficient facilities, skilled faculty, and academic support systems for disadvantaged students. Differences in the quality of school education also affect higher education access. Students from underfunded schools often struggle to meet the academic demands of

universities, resulting in lower enrollment and higher dropout rates. Additionally, a new form of inequality known as the digital divide has emerged in higher education. As online learning platforms and digital resources gain popularity, access to technology and the internet has become critical for academic success. Yet, many underprivileged students lack digital devices, reliable internet connections, or digital literacy skills. This disparity became especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when online learning was predominant.

The digital divide continues to disproportionately impact rural and low-income students. Inclusive higher education requires more than just increasing enrollment; it also demands ensuring equal opportunities for participation, learning, and achievement. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds need academic mentoring, financial aid, and inclusive campus environments to fully benefit from higher education. Universities need to implement policies addressing discrimination, provide support services, and promote diversity on campuses.

In summary, despite India's substantial progress in expanding higher education and adopting inclusive policies, socioeconomically disadvantaged communities still face access inequalities. Economic obstacles, social discrimination, regional disparities, and institutional limitations continue to hinder many students from pursuing higher education. Addressing these issues requires collective efforts from the government, educational institutions, and society at large. By implementing inclusive policies, enhancing infrastructure, and targeting support toward marginalized groups, India can advance towards the goal of ensuring equal higher education access for all students.

Objective 0f Study

1. To investigate the idea of inclusive higher education in India
2. To determine the socioeconomic obstacles that underprivileged groups must overcome in order to obtain higher education
3. To examine the continued disparity in access to higher education
4. To assess how government initiatives and policies support inclusive higher education
5. To make recommendations for ways to enhance equitable access to higher education

Literature Review

Krishnaiah and Naresh (2023); In their study on inclusion in Indian higher education, Naresh and Krishnaiah concentrated on underrepresented groups, including women, people with disabilities, minorities, Scheduled Castes (SC), and Scheduled Tribes (ST). According to the report, many socially and economically disadvantaged students still encounter obstacles while trying to enroll in colleges, despite the fact that higher education has greatly increased in India. Poverty, prejudice, a lack of academic support, and a low educational background are some of these obstacles. The authors stressed that in order to help marginalized students thrive in higher education, schools must offer financial aid, scholarships, and academic support programs. In order to increase access and inclusion in higher education institutions, they also emphasized the significance of legislative efforts like the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

Tilak (2021); Tilak investigated the disparity between wealthy and poor students' access to higher education in India. According to the report, students from rural and low-income families participate in higher education at much lower rates than those from wealthy and metropolitan backgrounds. Due to both economic constraints and gender prejudice, rural women are at a double disadvantage. In order to promote educational access for

marginalized groups, the study proposed more public funding, scholarships, and affirmative action regulations. It also stated that socioeconomic disparity had a significant impact on educational participation.

Gopinath (2025) Gopinath examined regional and socioeconomic disparities in India's participation in higher education. The study looked at enrollment trends across various social categories using statistical data. The results showed that, in comparison to students from general categories, members of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes have fewer opportunities to pursue higher education. Even while some groups' engagement has increased over time, there are still significant differences. Because students from higher income categories are more inclined to seek university education, economic status also plays a significant effect.

Naik (2024); Naik looked at the idea of inclusive higher education and the difficulties it faces in India. The study showed that many underprivileged communities are still underrepresented in higher education despite legislative efforts to promote equity. Access for underprivileged populations is nevertheless hampered by financial hardship, inadequate schooling, ignorance, and a lack of institutional assistance. In order to advance equal chances in higher education, the study highlighted the necessity of robust institutional rules, improved financial aid, and welcoming campus settings.

AI Publications Analysis (2024); The growing divide between rich and poor students in India was highlighted in a recent study on inequality in access to higher education. According to the study, students from low-income households find it challenging to complete their education due to the growing expense of higher education. Despite the growing number of colleges, enrollment patterns are still influenced by socioeconomic disparities. In order to lessen educational disparity, the report recommended financial aid schemes, government subsidies, and inclusive education policies.

CPRHE Research Study: The issue of equity and inclusion in Indian higher education was the subject of research carried out by the Centre for Policy Research in Higher Education. According to the study, students' and their families' financial burdens gradually increased as higher education became more accessible. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds have been negatively impacted by this change, as they frequently struggle to pay for tuition, housing, and other educational costs. To ensure that all students have equal access to higher education, the study recommended increasing government funding and enhancing scholarship programs. Desai (Study on Educational Inequality) Desai talked about how social stratification affects educational opportunities and looked at educational disparities in India. Numerous poor children, the study found, Due to social and financial obstacles, children from marginalized families drop out of school early. As a result, only a small percentage of students from disadvantaged backgrounds graduate from high school. The research highlighted the importance of improving school education and reducing early dropouts to increase participation in higher education. Das (2023)

In India, Chaudhury, Das, and Sarkar (2023); Das conducted research comparing educational inequality between urban and rural areas. Literacy and educational attainment were found to be significantly higher in urban areas than in rural areas, according to the study. Rural students often face problems such as lack of infrastructure, limited access to educational institutions, and poor economic conditions. They are less likely to enroll in higher education institutions because of these factors. Promoting equal educational opportunities and improving the educational infrastructure in rural areas were suggested by the study. The trio of Vaidehi, Reddy, and Banerjee The caste-based digital divide in India and its effect on educational access were the subject of this study. The research found that disadvantaged caste groups have less access to computers, internet facilities, and digital

learning resources compared to other groups. With the rise of online learning platforms, the digital divide has become a major obstacle to inclusive education. The study came to the conclusion that ensuring equal educational opportunities requires reducing income inequality and improving digital infrastructure.

This research focused on socio-economic factors affecting participation in education. The study explained that family background, income level, and social environment strongly influence a student's decision to pursue higher education. It is common for students from disadvantaged communities to lack the necessary support and resources to continue their education. As a result, they might not get a lot out of education and drop out before they should. In order to increase educational participation, the study suggested that policy interventions should address both social and economic barriers.

Methodology

The research design of this study primarily uses a quantitative-dominant mixed-methods approach, aiming to investigate access inequities in higher education among socio-economically disadvantaged groups in India. The quantitative part is grounded in secondary data to empirically assess and analyze differences, while the qualitative part involves a thematic review of policy documents and academic literature to situate findings within broader structural and implementation contexts. According to Banerjee and Kumar (Banerjee, 2025) and Choudhury and Kumar (Choudhury and Kumar, 2024), this approach aligns with existing methods used to study educational inequality. It allows for descriptive profiling of changes and offers explanations for the processes causing them. This design is particularly suitable for the study's objectives, enabling longitudinal comparisons of access measures and capturing policy-level subtleties that purely econometric studies might overlook (Tilak & Choudhury, 2019). There will be no primary human participants, and all analyses will comply with ethical standards for secondary data analysis, such as openly operationalizing variables and considering data limitations

Data Sources

The quantitative research utilizes two complementary nationally representative data sources: the education-specific rounds of the National Sample Survey (NSS) Office and the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE). These sources provide robust, large-scale data on admission trends, demographic profiles, and socio-economic factors, including household and institutional trends.

The primary datasets for examining access inequities in econometric modeling are the NSS 71st round (January-June 2014) and 75th round (July 2017-June 2018). These rounds, conducted by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI), used a stratified multi-stage sampling design and surveyed 100,554 and 100,786 households in rural and urban areas, respectively, focusing on the educational status of individuals aged 5-29 years (MoSPI, 2015, 2019). For higher education access, the analysis will target the 18-23-year age group (n [?] 25,000 to 30,000 per round), producing binary outcomes for both enrollment and attendance. These rounds represent the most recent comprehensive NSS education surveys, enabling a quasi-panel assessment of changes over a four-year period amidst policy shifts like reservation expansion and digital initiatives (Banerjee, 2025). Sampling weights in both rounds are adjusted for non-response rates below 5% to ensure national representativeness.

The AISHE 2021-22 report, the Ministry of Education's latest extensive release, provides further institutional-

level data (as of 2025, with additional cycles for 2022-23 and 2024-26 in progress, Ministry of Education, 2024). The AISHE survey covers over 45,000 higher education institutions, including Gross Enrollment Ratios (GER) and disaggregated data by gender, social category (SC/ST/OBC/General), discipline (e.g., STEM, professional), and location (rural/urban/state). Government colleges with 4.33 million enrollments are included in the 2021-22 survey, which achieved a response rate exceeding 95% (Ministry of Education, 2024). This source supplements the NSS household data by providing aggregate trends post-COVID, though it lacks individual socio-economic controls.

Policy documents like the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, related implementation guidelines, and thematic reviews of peer-reviewed literature (Government of India, 2020; Choudhary, J., 2026) form the data for qualitative research. Their intentional selection is due to their pertinence to equity provisions, contributing to understanding challenges such as digital divides and the effectiveness of affirmative action.

Nature of the Study

The research will primarily be qualitative and analytical, focusing on examining policy frameworks, government reports, and academic literature related to inclusive higher education.

Sources of Data:

1) **Primary Sources:**
   a) Government policies and education programs
   b) Equality and education-related constitutional provisions
   c) Official reports and policy documents

2) **Additional Sources**
   a) Academic journals and books about social inequality and higher education
   b) Research papers and reports from educational institutions
   c) Survey findings and government data**.**

Descriptive and critical methods will be applied in analyzing the collected data. Comparative analysis may also be conducted to explore differences between policy intentions and actual outcomes.

Study Focus:

The study solely focuses on analyzing inclusive higher education policies and disparities in access within India. It primarily targets groups like Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, as well as rural populations and economically disadvantaged sections. The research delves into institutional practices, policy frameworks, structural barriers, and higher education access, but does not heavily concentrate on education quality or specific academic outcomes unless they pertain directly to access and inclusion issues.

Importance of the Study

There are several reasons for the study's importance. Firstly, it contributes to the increasing knowledge about educational inequality in India. Understanding the challenges faced by disadvantaged communities is crucial for

formulating effective policies that promote social justice and inclusive development. Secondly, the research highlights the discrepancy between policy goals and actual achievements in higher education. By pinpointing institutional and structural barriers, the study could help policymakers develop more targeted interventions. Thirdly, achieving broader national and international development goals depends on inclusive higher education. Education is closely tied to economic growth, social mobility, and democratic participation. Thus, providing equal access to higher education can help reduce poverty and inequality in Indian society. Lastly, the study's findings could assist educators, policymakers, and researchers involved in higher education reform. By examining policy frameworks and socioeconomic realities, the research aims to offer practical recommendations for improving access and inclusion.

Findings and Discussion

This section showcases the empirical findings derived from secondary data analyses, along with a discussion that combines quantitative results with policy contexts and scholarly insights. The findings indicate moderate progress in reducing socioeconomic inequalities in higher education access from 2014 to 2018, but persistent and emerging disparities remain across gender, caste, class, and religion. Although overall enrollment rose significantly up to the 2021–2022 period, inequalities are still prevalent, especially for Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) in professional and STEM fields. These trends highlight the limited effectiveness of affirmative action and the ongoing implementation difficulties related to the National Education Policy 2020 (Government of India, 2020; Banerjee, 2025).

Descriptive Trends in Enrollment and GER

The study presents the trends in enrollment and the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) for various demographics and fields of study. The AISHE 2021-22 data show a significant rise in higher education enrollment, reaching 43.3 million students, with a GER of 28.4 (Ministry of Education, 2024). This marks an increase from approximately 34.2 million enrollments and a GER of 24.3 in 2014-15. When broken down by social category, it is revealed that SC and ST enrollments rose by 44% and 65%, respectively, yet their GERs are still below the national average. Female enrollment achieved parity (GPI 1.01), mainly due to gains in general programs, but geographical disparities persist, with rural and northern/eastern states being underrepresented.

Table 1: Higher Education Enrollment and Gross Enrollment Rate (GER) by Category, AISHE-2021-22.

Category	Total Enrollment (in lakhs)	Percentage of Total	GER (%)	Change in Enrollment Since 2014–15 (%)
Overall	4330	100	28.4	+26.5
Scheduled Castes (SC)	662.3	15.3	25.9	+44
Scheduled Tribes (ST)	271	6.3	21.2	+65
Other Backward Classes (OBC)	1630	37.6	N/A	+32
Females	2070	47.8	28.5	+32 (overall female)
Rural Institutions (share)	N/A	61.4 (colleges)	N/A	Limited rural GER gains

"Source: Ministry of Education (2024); based on the AISHE 2021–22 report. Note: GER for OBC is not reported separately; the rural-urban breakdown is estimated via the location of institutions.

Interpretation: The uneven growth in enrollment for SCs and STs highlights the impact of affirmative action, though the existing overall disparities (e.g., ST GER being 7.2 points below the national average) suggest that full progress has not been achieved. This shortfall is likely due to inadequacies in preparatory schooling and geographical hindrances (Banerjee, 2025). While gender equality appears to be achieved, there are still specific fields where women are underrepresented, especially in areas with high returns.

Measuring inequality and changes over time (NSS 2014–2018)" Analyses of the NSS 71st (2014) and 75th (2017–18) rounds indicate a reduction in overall socio-economic inequality in higher education enrollment (HEE) and attendance (HEA). The Erreygers-corrected Concentration Index (CI_E) for HEE fell from around 0.35 to 0.28, showing a decrease in pro-rich bias, and similar patterns were observed for HEA. The enrollment rates for the poorest quintiles increased by 5 to 6 percentage points, while the wealthiest groups continued to have high access.

Table 2: Breakdown of Inequality in Higher Education Enrollment (HEE) by Contributing Factors in NSS Rounds

Factor	Contribution to Inequality (%) – 2014 (NSS 71st)	Contribution to Inequality (%) – 2018 (NSS 75th)	Percentage Point Change
Household Economic Status (MPCE Quintiles)	55.3	27.4	-27.9
Social Group (Caste)	25.8	31.0	+5.2
Gender	8.1	11.7	+3.6
Location (Rural-Urban)	6.4	9.9	+3.5
Religion	4.4	20.0	+15.6
Residual/Unexplained	Variable	Variable	N/A
Total Explained	~90	~95	N/A

Source: Adapted from Banerjee (2025), based on Wagstaff decomposition using unit-level NSS data. Positive values indicate pro-advantaged bias.

Interpretation: The halving of economic status's contribution signals policy successes, such as expanded scholarships and institutional growth, benefiting lower quintiles (Choudhury & Kumar, 2024). However, rising shares from gender, location and religion highlight emerging fault lines: rural females and Muslim minorities face compounded exclusions. Caste persists as a major driver, suggesting reservations' limited penetration into quality/private segments (Banerjee, 2025).

Explanatory Models: Odds of Access

Logistic regression results confirm intersecting disadvantages. Adjusted odds ratios (ORs) for HEE/HEA in 2018 show:

- Poorest quintile: OR 1.45 (95% CI: 1.32–1.59) relative to 2014, indicating improved odds.

- Females: OR 0.82 ($p < 0.01$) vs. males, worsening slightly.
- Rural: OR 0.68 ($p < 0.001$) vs. urban.
- ST: OR 0.55 ($p < 0.001$) vs. General category.
- Muslim: OR 0.72 ($p < 0.05$) vs. Hindu.

For professional/STEM access (multinomial models), economic controls attenuate caste gaps by 40–50%, but gender bias persists (females OR 0.45 in engineering).

Table 3: Adjusted Odds Ratios for Higher Education Attendance (HEA) by Key Predictors, Pooled NSS Data (2014–2018)

Predictor	Odds Ratio (OR)	95% Confidence Interval	p-value
Poorest Quintile (vs. Richest)	0.42	0.38–0.46	<0.001
Female (vs. Male)	0.85	0.81–0.89	<0.001
Rural (vs. Urban)	0.71	0.68–0.74	<0.001
ST (vs. General)	0.61	0.57–0.65	<0.001
Muslim (vs. Hindu)	0.78	0.73–0.83	<0.001
Interaction: Female × Poorest	0.69	0.62–0.77	<0.01

Source: *Authors' estimation; controls include household size, parental education, state fixed effects. Reference categories in parentheses.* Points represent adjusted odds ratios (OR); horizontal lines indicate 95% confidence intervals. The vertical reference line at OR = 1 denotes no difference relative to the reference category. All estimates are adjusted for household size, parental education and state fixed effects.

Interpretation:

Intersectional effects (e.g., poorest females) amplify disadvantages, with ORs below 0.70 indicating systemic barriers beyond income (Choudhary, J. 2026). Improvements for reserved categories are evident but insufficient in high-value fields.

Figure 1 Illustrates the adjusted odds ratios for higher education attendance, highlighting pronounced disadvantages for rural residents, Scheduled Tribes and individuals from the poorest households.

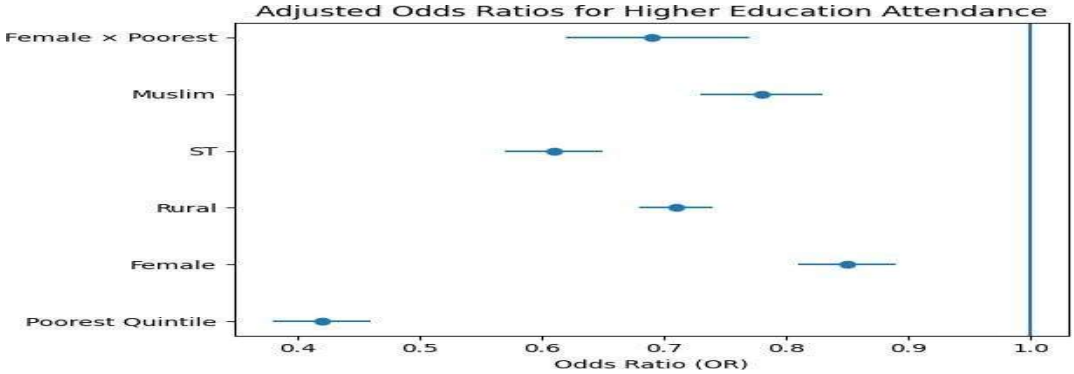

Figure 1: Adjusted Odds Ratios for Higher Education Attendance by Socio-Economic and Social Predictors

Points represent adjusted odds ratios (OR); horizontal lines indicate 95% confidence intervals. The vertical reference line at OR = 1 denotes no difference relative to the reference category. All estimates are adjusted for household size, parental education and state fixed effects.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that Indian advanced education has made some progress toward getting more inclusive, but numerous inequalities still remain. Over the times, access to advanced education has bettered for scholars from poorer families. before, ménage profitable status played a veritably large part in determining who could enter advanced education. For illustration, in 2014 further than 55 percent of inequality in access was linked to profitable background. still, by 2018 this figure had dropped to about 27 percent(Banerjee, 2025). This change suggests that government programs similar as the expansion of universities and sodalities, along with fiscal support programs like literacy, have helped scholars from lower socio- profitable backgrounds enter advanced education. The reduction in profitable inequality indicates that these programs have made some positive impact. Studies have also shown that the expansion of public institutions and education programs helped reduce the fiscal burden of advanced education for underprivileged groups(Choudhury and Tilak, 2019; Tilak and Choudhury, 2019).

Still, while profitable inequality has dropped, other forms of inequality have come more visible. Factors similar as gender, religion, and place of hearthstone(pastoral or civic) are now playing a larger part in determining access to advanced education. According to Banerjee(2025), gender contributed about 3.6 chance points, pastoral-civic position contributed 3.5 chance points, and religion contributed 15.6 chance points to overall inequality. This means that indeed if profitable walls are reduced, social and artistic factors continue to produce disadvantages for certain groups. These patterns show the limits of programs that concentrate only on profitable support. The National Education Policy(NEP) 2020 also recognizes these issues through the conception of Socio-Economically underprivileged Groups(SEDGs), which highlights the need to address multiple forms of inequality together(Government of India, 2020). estate- grounded inequality remains one of the most important challenges in advanced education access. Indeed in 2018, further than 30 percent of inequality was linked to social group or estate(Banerjee, 2025). Although there has been enhancement in registration figures for slated gentries(SCs) and slated lines(STs), their participation is still lower compared to the public normal. Data from AISHE shows that since 2014 – 15, registration of SC scholars increased by about 44 percent and that of ST scholars increased by about 65 percent. Despite this progress, their Gross Registration rates remain lower than the public normal.

For illustration, SC scholars have a GER of about 25.9 percent and ST scholars about percent, while the public normal is 28.4 percent(Ministry of Education, 2024). This suggests that although reservation programs and expansion have helped, they've not fully removed walls faced by these communities.

Research also shows that profitable factors alone can not explain these differences. Issues similar as poor quality training before council, lack of academic medication, and social demarcation on premises may also affect the participation of underprivileged groups(Choudhury and Kumar, 2024). Gender and estate demarcation come indeed stronger in professional and specialized fields similar as engineering and STEM education. In these areas,

women from underprivileged social groups have much lower chances of registration. For illustration, the odds of registration for some groups in engineering courses are lower than half compared to further advantaged groups(Choudhary, 2026). former studies have also shown that indeed in poorer families, sons are frequently given further educational support than daughters due to traditional social stations(Choudhury and Kumar, 2024).

Another important issue is the growing significance of religion and position in shaping educational openings. Muslim scholars, who frequently do n't profit from reservation programs in the same way as some other groups, continue to face disadvantages in advanced education access(Banerjee, 2025). also, scholars living in pastoral areas face challenges in penetrating advanced education institutions. Although numerous sodalities are technically located in pastoral regions — about 61.4 percent according to government data factual access is frequently limited due to poor transportation, long distances, and limited digital connectivity(Ministry of Education, 2024; Choudhary, 2026). These walls make it delicate for pastoral scholars to continue their education after academy.

The COVID- 19 epidemic also stressed these inequalities. During the epidemic, online literacy came common, but numerous scholars from underprivileged backgrounds demanded access to dependable internet or digital bias. As a result, participation in online education was lower among socio- economically underprivileged groups. still, recent AISHE data suggests that overall registration has gradationally recovered after the epidemic(Ministry of Education, 2024). Indeed so, the situation raises questions about whether the pretensions of the National Education Policy 2020 related to educational equity are being achieved. The policy proposes measures similar as Special Education Zones, Gender- Addition finances, and bettered digital structure to support underprivileged groups. While these enterprise are promising, their perpetration has been slow and their full impact has not yet been realized (Government of India, 2020; Ullah, 2025).

The findings of this study also support important theoretical ideas about inequality in education. According to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, education systems frequently reproduce social inequality because scholars from advantaged families retain further artistic and social capital. These advantages help them succeed in educational institutions more fluently than others (Tilak, 2007). In India, the adding privatization of advanced education where about percent of institutions are private — may also profit scholars from further privileged backgrounds. This can make it harder for underprivileged groups to contend inversely. The results also support the conception of intersectionality, which explains that different forms of inequality similar as estate, gender, religion, and position can combine and produce deeper disadvantages(Choudhary, 2026).

These findings have important policy counter accusations . If India wants to achieve the NEP target of 50 percent Gross Registration rate in advanced education by 2035 and meet the pretensions of Sustainable Development thing(SDG) 4.3, simply adding the number of institutions wo n't be enough.programs must concentrate on targeted support for underprivileged groups. This could include better monitoring of inequality using detailed data, expanding public universities in underserved countries similar as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, and creating literacy that specifically support pastoral women and nonage scholars(Government of India, 2020; Banerjee, 2025). adding government spending on education to around 6 percent of GDP, as recommended in the NEP, would also help ameliorate access and quality. In addition, perfecting affordable internet access through public hookups can reduce digital inequalities. unborn checks should also collect information about groups similar as LGBTQIA scholars and persons with disabilities to more understand their challenges.

This exploration has several strengths. It uses nationally representative data from the National Sample Survey(NSS), which allows a dependable analysis of inequality in advanced education access. The study also combines NSS data with AISHE institutional statistics, furnishing a broader understanding of both individual and institutional factors(O'Donnell et al., 2008). still, the study also has some limitations. The NSS data used in the analysis was collected before the full perpetration of the National Education Policy 2020, so it may not capture the most recent changes. In addition, AISHE data is added up at the institutional position and does n't always give detailed information about individual scholars(Ministry of Education, 2024). Another limitation is that gender in the data is treated only as a double order, which does n't reflect the gests ofnon-binary individualities. tone-reported check data may also contain some bias(Choudhary, 2026).

unborn exploration should thus use more recent datasets, similar as new rounds of the Periodic Labour Force Survey(PLFS) or streamlined AISHE reports after 2022- 23, to examine the long- term goods of NEP reforms. Qualitative studies fastening on the gests of scholars from socio- economically underprivileged groups on university premises would also give deeper perceptivity into the challenges they face.

The Indian advanced education system has made important progress in perfecting access by reducing profitable walls. still, significant inequalities still remain due to estate, gender, religion, and position. Addressing these issues requires programs that concentrate on multiple forms of disadvantage at the same time. Without similar intersectional reforms, the thing of creating a truly inclusive advanced education system in India may remain deficient. icing equal access to advanced education is essential not only for social justice but also for the country's popular and profitable development(Tilak, 2007; Government of India, 2020).

Policy Implications and Recommendations.

The study plays a crucial role in shaping India's higher education policy, especially concerning equal educational opportunities for economically disadvantaged groups. In recent years, accessing higher education has become more feasible due to scholarships, reservation policies, and the fast growth of educational institutions. Research by Banerjee (2025) and Choudhury and Tilak (2019) indicates that government efforts have increased education accessibility, reducing the impact of a family's economic status on higher education access between 2014 and 2018. These initiatives have enabled many low-income students to attend college for the first time. Despite financial strides, not all disparities have been eradicated.

Inequalities related to gender, rural-urban divides, caste, and religion remain prevalent. Students from rural locations, minority communities, and underprivileged castes still face hurdles to accessing quality higher education. Girls in rural areas often experience educational access restrictions due to societal and economic challenges. The presence of these inequalities suggests that simply increasing educational seats or institutions isn't enough. Chaudhary (2026) argues that policies must specifically tackle the social and structural barriers hindering equal access for many groups. Without addressing these disparities, higher education may fail to drive social mobility and inclusive progress. Education is expected to elevate individuals' social and economic status, yet ongoing inequities limit its effectiveness. This issue is crucial to achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.3, which ensures equitable access to high-quality, affordable higher education.

Moreover, India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 stresses the inclusion of marginalized groups in higher education to reach a 50% Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) by 2035. This research also brings attention to

reevaluating affirmative action policies. Reservation laws have facilitated Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) entering Indian colleges and universities. Government data (Ministry of Education, 2024) shows improved participation recently, although they remain underrepresented in prestigious fields like engineering, medicine, and STEM programs, which typically offer higher incomes and better job prospects. Limited participation from disadvantaged groups in these areas suggests issues linked to academic preparation and institutional support. Challenges such as poor school facilities, insufficient guidance, and financial struggles can hinder marginalized students. Consequently, despite admission through reservation, they may struggle in demanding academic programs.

Thus, policy initiatives should focus beyond just seat availability and improve preparation, mentoring, and support systems for these students (Choudhury and Kumar, 2024). The study also emphasizes the importance of addressing gender and regional inequalities. Women, especially from rural and minority backgrounds, face numerous obstacles in accessing higher education. In numerous rural districts, cultural norms or financial constraints may lead families to prioritize boys' education. This is particularly visible in aspirational districts where educational opportunities and infrastructure are inadequate (Banerjee, 2025). Without targeted policies, these gaps may persist across generations. The National Education Policy 2020 has implemented initiatives to tackle these challenges, suggesting Special Education Zones to improve access in disadvantaged areas and recommending a Gender Inclusion Fund to support women's education. While these policies offer a strong framework for inclusive education, implementation has been slow. By 2025, many initiatives are in their early stages, thereby limiting impact. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated digital disparities as many students from marginalized and rural backgrounds lacked online learning resources (Ullah, 2025). Based on research findings and NEP 2020's objectives, several recommendations are proposed to address these issues.

Enhance Intersectional Targeting:

Policies must address multiple disadvantages at once. For instance, students who are impoverished, from marginalized castes, and living in rural areas face greater challenges than those experiencing a single disadvantage. Comprehensive data on caste, gender, religion, and location intersectionality should be collected in government surveys such as the NSS and PLFS. Scholarship programs should prioritize individuals facing multiple disadvantages, such as rural ST girls or low-income Muslim students. Special quotas or targeted financial aid could help them participate in professional programs (Choudhary, J., 2026).

Strengthen Public Infrastructure in Underserved Areas:

Higher education institutions are often located in urban areas, creating access issues for rural students. The government should focus on building multidisciplinary higher education institutes in states with low enrollment, such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Jharkhand. Establishing colleges in rural areas can lessen geographical barriers and enhance accessibility. Offering hostels, transportation, and secure accommodations can also help rural and female students pursue higher education (Ministry of Education, 2024; Banerjee, 2025).

Improve Digital Access and Academic Support:

The digital divide presents a major challenge in higher education. Many disadvantaged students lack access to devices, internet connectivity, or digital learning platforms. Government initiatives like the PMGDISHA program

should be expanded to provide affordable digital access to socio-economically disadvantaged students. Higher education institutions should also implement bridge courses, remedial classes, and mentoring programs to help students from weaker academic backgrounds adjust to university-level studies (Government of India, 2020).

Promote Inclusive Participation of the Private Sector:

Private institutions are increasingly important in India's higher education system yet often charge high fees, limiting poor students' access. Policies should encourage private universities and colleges to embrace inclusive practices, such as reservation policies, fee waivers, and scholarships for disadvantaged students. Public-private partnerships can extend vocational and online education programs to marginalized communities (Choudhury and Kumar, 2024). Increase Public Funding and Strengthen Monitoring:

Sufficient financial investment is essential for achieving educational equity. The government should boost education spending to 6 percent of GDP, as advocated in several policy reports. A segment of this funding should be earmarked specifically for programs supporting socio-economically disadvantaged groups. Additionally, an independent monitoring system should be established to review NEP implementation progress annually. This system should track indicators like enrollment, completion rates, and employment outcomes of disadvantaged students to ensure policies are genuinely providing improvements (Tilak, 2007).

In conclusion, this research highlights that merely expanding higher education cannot ensure equality. Effective policies must tackle the social, economic, and regional barriers hindering access for marginalized groups. By reinforcing targeted support, enhancing infrastructure, promoting digital inclusion, and boosting financial investment, India can align more closely with the inclusive vision set forth in NEP 2020. Such measures will not only help achieve the GER target but will also ensure that the country's demographic dividend contributes to sustainable and equitable national development. To summarize, the Indian higher education system has seen some progress in reducing economic barriers and increasing access to universities and colleges. Government initiatives, scholarship programs, reservation policies, and the growth of institutions have enabled more students from diverse backgrounds to engage in higher education. However, several inequalities persist. Social elements such as gender, caste, religion, and geographic location continue to impact students' opportunities. Students from socio-economically disadvantaged communities, particularly those in rural and remote areas, still encounter numerous challenges in accessing quality higher education. These obstacles include insufficient financial resources, inadequate educational infrastructure, limited awareness of higher education opportunities, and social discrimination.

Despite the rise in higher education enrollment in recent years, this growth has not been evenly distributed across all segments of society. Marginalized groups like Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, minority communities, and women from impoverished households frequently have lower participation rates and higher dropout rates. Often, students from these groups face difficulties in continuing their education due to economic pressures, lack of academic support, and limited inclusivity in institutions. Thus, merely increasing the number of universities or available seats is not sufficient to achieve genuine equality in higher education.

From a research standpoint, these findings suggest that policymaking should extend beyond expansion and basic affirmative action. What is necessary is transformative equity, which involves developing a system that actively dismantles structural barriers and ensures equal opportunities for all students. This demands an intersectional

approach that examines how various factors such as caste, gender, class, and location combine to affect educational outcomes. Policies need to be grounded in reliable evidence and data, ensuring they efficiently address the real challenges faced by disadvantaged communities.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 highlights the importance of inclusive and equitable education. It proposes several reforms, including improved access, enhanced financial aid, promotion of digital learning, and support for disadvantaged groups. However, the effectiveness of these reforms hinges on robust implementation, monitoring, and ongoing policy enhancement.

Strong and precise measures are essential; otherwise, the objective of creating an inclusive knowledge society by 2035 could be challenging to achieve. In a fast-evolving and credential-focused economy, unequal access to education may continue to perpetuate cycles of disadvantage.

Therefore, future research should concentrate on long-term monitoring of the outcomes from NEP 2020. Longitudinal studies can aid scholars and policymakers in determining whether the reforms are genuinely decreasing inequalities in higher education. Ongoing data analysis and evaluation will also assist in identifying gaps and facilitating timely policy adjustments. By doing so, research can play a crucial role in fostering the development of a more inclusive, equitable, and accessible higher education system in India (Government of India, 2020; Banerjee, 2025).

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate "This research is exclusively based on secondary data derived from national datasets that are publicly accessible. The data was sourced from official government entities like the National Sample Survey (NSS) and the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE). The data sets are gathered and released by Indian government agencies, adhering to established ethical standards and protocols. As the research did not entail direct engagement with human subjects and did not involve the collection of primary data, formal ethical approval and obtaining informed consent were not necessary to carry out this study.

Permission for Publication "There is no applicable content. This study does not contain any personal or identifiable details about individuals. **"Accessibility of Information and Resources"**. The datasets utilized in this research are publicly accessible and can be obtained from the official sources of the Government of India.

- The National Sample Survey (NSS) data can be accessed through the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI).
- The All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) data are available via the Ministry of Education, Government of India.
- Any datasets that have been processed or analytical procedures employed during the research can be made available by the corresponding author when reasonably requested.
- Competing Interests" The authors state that they have no financial or non-financial conflicts of interest that might have impacted the research shown in this study. This study was not supported by any particular financial assistance from government, business, or non-profit organizations.
- Contributions by the Authors Each author played an important role in the development and planning of the research study. The team worked together to gather data from secondary sources, perform statistical analysis, and interpret the findings. Writing and revising the manuscript was a joint effort, with all authors thoroughly reviewing it to maintain academic standards.

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