

Policy Shifts, Post-Pandemic Shock, and the Minority Participation Deficit: An Empirical Analysis of Muslim Student Enrolment in Indian Higher Education

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Abstract

Social mobility, economic progress, and inclusive development are significantly influenced by higher education. Even though India's higher education sector has been steadily growing, there are still differences in participation among various social and religious groups. In comparison to their demographic proportion, Muslim students, who make up the largest religious minority in the nation, remain underrepresented in higher education. The enrollment patterns of Muslim students in Indian higher education between 2018–19 and 2022–2023 are examined with the variables linked to shifts in their involvement. The study used a quantitative descriptive research approach and analyzed the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), and Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+). To comprehend trends in access and advancement, important metrics like enrollment share, Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER), Gender Parity Index (GPI), and level-wise participation were examined.

The results show that enrollment in higher education in India rose over the study period, but Muslim students did not rise at the same rate. During the COVID-19 epidemic, there was a drop in enrollment, which only partially recovered in the years that followed. The data shows that representation gradually declines from undergraduate to PhD levels, indicating difficulties with educational advancement and retention. Participation was found to be significantly influenced by economic vulnerability, growing educational expenditures, geographical differences, a lack of institutional support, and modifications to educational assistance programs. Even though gender parity has improved over time, many students, especially women, continue to face obstacles relating to affordability, mobility, and access to educational infrastructure. The report emphasizes the necessity of specific legislative actions that help financial aid, enhance educational facilities in underprivileged areas, facilitate student transitions, and foster inclusive institutional settings. In addition to educational fairness, attaining more general national objectives of social inclusion and sustainable development depends on ensuring equitable participation in higher education.

Keywords: COVID-19, NEP 2020, India, Muslim students, higher education, educational equity, enrollment trends, and inclusion.

1. Introduction

Higher Education plays a key role in social and economic advancement. It enhances individual employment opportunities. It contributes to important role in social mobility, civic participation, and inclusive national development. In a pleuritic and diverse society like India, equitable access to higher education remains

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an important part of constitutional commitments to social justice and equality. Over the past few decades, there has been substantial expansion in India's higher education. All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) data show a steady increase in enrollment levels, along with a rise in the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER), among individuals aged 18-23 years. The national GER reached 28.4 percent, reflecting the continued growth of universities, colleges, and professional institutions across the country (Gopinath, 2025; Naik et al., 2024). Participation in higher education remains uneven across social groups, and significant disparities continue to characterize access and progression in the system. Targeted interventions, such as reservation policies and public support mechanisms, have contributed to and helped in increasing participation among Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), but enrollment trends in Muslims have a different pattern. Muslim is India's largest religious minority, constituting approx. 14.2 percent of the national population (Census, 2011), they continue to exhibit comparatively low levels of representation in higher education.

Sachar Committee Report (2006) documented substantial disadvantages in literacy, educational attainment, employment, and access to public institutions of Muslims. Muslim participation has not increased proportionately. AISHE data shows that the community share in higher education enrolment is still below 5.5 percent and declined to 4.63 percent during the pandemic period. This gap suggests that structural barriers continue to influence educational access and progression. Research points out that the combination of economic vulnerability, uneven educational infrastructure, spatial concentration in underserved regions, and less institutional support is an important factor shaping these outcomes.

During 2018 and 2023, two major developments, the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and changes in educational support policies affecting minority communities. The pandemic disrupted household livelihoods across India. A substantial proportion of Muslim households are badly affected by market closure during the pandemic, and educational discontinuation and delayed enrollment became increasingly common responses to financial stress. Many policy changes, in 2022 the Maulana Azad National Fellowship (MANF) was discontinued. Eligibility provision for certain pre matric schemes were revised and they generated concern regarding their implications for students from economically disadvantaged minority background. National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasized the supporting Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) and promoting greater inclusion within higher education.

Enrolment trends during these periods show an important opportunity to assess how economic shocks and policy changes may have interacted with preexisting inequalities. To understand these dynamics, it is essential to evaluate the extent to ongoing educational expansion has translated into meaningful participation for historically underrepresented communities.

Research Objectives

The two research objectives are as follows

- i. To examine the trends in Muslim student enrollment in Indian higher education between 2018 and 2023.
- ii. To identify the major factors affecting Muslim students' participation and progression in higher education.

Research Question

What factor contributed to the decline in Muslim student enrollment and participation in Indian higher education between 2018 and 2023?

2. Literature Review

Research on Muslim participation in higher education in India has consistently highlighted the existence of educational inequalities and structural barriers. A large number of literature traces these challenges to broader socio-economic disadvantages, unequal access to educational resources, and regional disparities in institutional development. The foundation of understanding educational exclusion among Indian Muslims was established by the Sachar Committee Report (2006) and the Ranganath Mishra Commission (2007); these reports point out the educational disadvantage to economic deprivation and the limited availability of quality educational institutions in minority concentrated areas. These studies established that educational exclusion among Muslims is associated with patterns of social and economic marginalization. Much research shows the structural factors influencing educational participation. Ahmad (2007) highlighted the consequences of residential segregation and uneven educational infrastructure, while Hasan (2009) emphasized the relationship between occupational vulnerability and restricted educational opportunities. Hasan and Mehta (2017) observed substantial regional disparities, with minority students in northern states experiencing lower participation rates than their others in several southern states.

Transition from secondary schooling to higher education is a critical stage where many students discontinue their education (Basant, 2012). Robinson (2012) and Khan (2016) highlighted how financial constraints restrict access to private institutions and educational credits, especially for students comes from low house hold incomes. Throat and Sen (2017) suggest that minority students remain concentrated in less resourced institutions and are underrepresented in elite higher educational institutions. Mir and Pramanik (2017) found that economic constraints affect educational choices within households, less opportunities for young women. Many evidences indicate that female educational aspirations remain strong where supportive infrastructure and institutional access are available. Shoo (2019) argued that perceptions regarding economic returns to higher education influence enrollment decisions among economically vulnerable households. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these challenges intensified manifold. Choudhury (2021) documented the effects of the digital divide on learning continuity, while Ahmad et al. (2024) linked pandemic-related income losses to disruption in educational progression among disadvantaged communities. Recent scholars examined the implications of policy changes for minority participation. Tilak (2021) points out that the rising cost of higher education in an increasingly privatized environment. Sheikh (2022) analyzed the potential implications of the discontinuation of the Maulana Azad Fellowship (MANF) for research scholars from minority backgrounds. Varghese (2022) shows that the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 highlights both its opportunities and challenges for promoting educational equity among socio-economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs). Sukumar (2020) emphasized the importance of mentorship and inclusive campus environments, while recent studies suggest that the underrepresentation of minority faculty members may influence student experiences and academic progression.

The existing literature demonstrates that lower participation in higher education is influenced by a combination of economic, institutional, geographical, and policy-related factors. Many earlier studies successfully documented that long-standing patterns of disadvantage, relatively less research has examined enrollment during the post-pandemic period. This study seeks to address that gap by analyzing trends in Muslim students between

2018 and 2023 and exploring the factors associated with the decline observed during and after the pandemic period.

To summarize the major contributions of previous research, Table 1 presents a review of selected studies relevant to minority participation in education and higher education in India.

Table 1. Summary of Major Studies on Muslim Participation in Education and Higher Education in India (2006-2025)

Authors(s) & Year	Core Focus	Key Findings
Sachar et al.(2006)	Socio-economic status	Reported significant educational and socio-economic disadvantages among Indian Muslims
Mishra Commission (2007)	Educational access and policy	Linked educational backwardness to poverty and inadequate educational infrastructure.
Ahmad (2007)	Spatial exclusion	Highlighted the effects of residential segregation on educational opportunities.
Hasan(2009)	Socio-economic exclusion.	Examined the relationship between occupational vulnerability and educational disadvantage.
Shariff (2012)	Educational aspiration)	Found strong educational aspirations among minority households despite economic constraints.
Robinson (2012)	Educational inequality	Demonstrated unequal access to private higher education across income groups.
Basant (2012)	Educational transitions	Identified the transition from school to college as a major point of student attrition.
Throat & Attewell (2012)	Labor market outcomes	Examined discrimination and its implications for educational incentives.
Jha & Mishra (2015)	Public expenditure	Reported inefficiencies in the utilization of minority education funds.
Khan (2016)	Educational finance	Highlighted barriers to accessing educational loans and formal credit.
Sedwal & Kamat (2016)	Intersectionality	Discussed the interaction of caste and religious disadvantage.
Hasan & Mehta (2017)	Regional disparities	Identified significant interstate differences in minority educational participation.
Thorat & Sen (2017)	Institutional inequality	Reported underrepresentation of minorities in elite higher education institutions.
Mir & Pramanik (2017)	Gender and education	Examined gender-related barriers to higher education participation.

Fazal (2018)	Campus experiences	Explored perceptions of exclusion and belonging in higher education spaces.
Borooah (2018)	Educational inequality	.Found persistent participation gaps beyond income differences.
Aslam (2019)	Alternative education systems	Examined challenges faced by students transitioning from Madrasas.
Sahoo (2019)	Returns to education	Analyzed perceptions of educational benefits and labor market outcomes.
Kundu (2020)	Urban educational inequality	Highlighted the role of poor schooling infrastructure in disadvantaged localities.
Thomas (2020)	Regional success models	Linked higher participation rates to stronger public educational infrastructure.
Sukumar (2020)	Institutional inclusion	Emphasized mentorship and campus support systems for first-generation learners.
Tilak (2021)	Privatization and equity	Raised concerns regarding private higher education sector.
Choudhury (2021)	Digital divide	Documented unequal access to online education during the pandemic.
Sheikh (2022)	Research funding policies	Discussed implications of changes in fellowship support for minority scholars.
Varghese (2022)	NEP 2020 and inclusion	Evaluated opportunities and challenges within the SEDG framework.
Raju (2023)	Educational geography	Identified underserved regions with limited higher education access.
Ahamad et al. (2024)	Post-pandemic impacts	Linked household economic stress to disruptions in educational participation.
Naik et al. (2024)	Inclusive growth	Examined gaps between overall educational expansion and minority participation.
Gopinath (2025)	Educational inequality	Analyzed continuing disparities in access to higher education.
Khalid (2025)	Faculty representation	Examined the relationship between faculty diversity and student progression.

Research Gap

The existing literature provides substantial evidence regarding the historical and structural challenges affecting Muslim participation in education. There are limited attention has been paid to enrollment changes during the period immediately before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The combined effect of economic disruptions, barriers, and policy changes on enrollment is insufficiently explored. This study addresses

the gap by examining Muslim student enrollment trends between 2018 and 2023 and by analyzing the factors associated with the decline in participation observed during this period.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative descriptive research design based on the analysis of secondary data. Data is taken from All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), 75th Round-Household Social Consumption: Education, Unified District Information System for Education + (UDISE+). The approach is intended to examine trends in Muslim students enrollments in Indian higher education between the academic years 2018-19 and 2022-23. After analyzing enrollment patterns across five years, the study investigates changes in participation before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

To access patterns of participation in higher education, the study employs four key indicators, such as Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER), Total Enrollment and Enrollment Share, Gender Parity Index GPI, and Level-wise Enrollment Distribution.

Limitation of the Study

This study is based on secondary data and dependent on the scope and quality of information available in official datasets. The analysis identifies associations and trends but does not establish direct causal relationships between policy changes and enrollment outcomes. In addition, individual-level factors such as student motivation, household decision-making processes, and local institutional conditions cannot be fully captured through aggregate national data. Despite these limitations, the selected datasets provide a robust basis for examining broad patterns of participation in higher education.

4. Results and Findings

4.1. Enrollment Trends and Participation Patterns

AISHE (2018-22) statistics analysis shows an increase of higher education, but the participation of Muslim students reflects opposing patterns. Table 2 illustrates the continuous expansion of the Indian higher education sector, with total enrollment rising from 37.4 million in 2021-22; however, the enrollment of Muslim students shows a less steady trend. Muslim enrollment saw a significant decrease in 2020-21, despite a slight increase from 2.10 million in 2018-19 to 2.12 million in 2019-20. In comparison to the prior year, enrollment dropped to 1.92 million students, or roughly 9.43 percent. The percentage of Muslims fell from 5.50 percent in 2019-20 to 4.63 percent in 2020-21. Enrollment increased to 2.09 million students in 2021- 22; it was still below pre-pandemic levels. These results imply that not all social categories were equally affected by the growth of higher education during the research period.

Table 2: Share of Muslim Students in Total Higher Education Enrollment (2018–19 to 2021–22)

Academic Year	Total (Millions)	Enrollment Muslim (Millions)	Enrollment Muslim (%)	Share Annual Growth Rate (%)
2018–19	37.40	2.10	5.61	—

2019–20	38.50	2.12	5.50	+0.95
2020–21	41.40	1.92	4.63	–9.43
2021–22	43.30	2.09	4.82	+8.85

Source: *Compiled from AISHE Reports (2018–19 to 2021–22).*

To assess the extent of representation, enrollment shares were compared with population proportions. The results indicate substantial variation across social groups. While Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes display levels of participation closer to their demographic share, Muslim students remain considerably underrepresented within higher education. These findings indicate the persistence of a significant participation gap and suggest that broader expansion in higher education has not translated into proportional representation for all sections of society.

4.2 Progression Across Levels of Higher Education

When students transition from undergraduate to higher education programs, their representation decreases gradually, as shown by an analysis of enrollment across various higher education levels. According to the pattern, participation peaks at the undergraduate level and gradually declines at the graduate and PhD levels. Muslim students' representation is about 5.0% of undergraduate enrollment in 2021–2022. This percentage decreased to about 4.0 percent at the postgraduate level, while participation in doctoral programs was about 2.7 percent. Beyond the undergraduate level, the observed pattern indicates difficulties with educational advancement and retention. Financial limitations, limited access to advanced academic possibilities, and rising higher education prices may contribute to the loss in representation across successive educational levels.

Figure 1: Distribution of Muslim Student Participation Across Educational Levels

S.N.	Educational Level	Representation Share (%)
1	Undergraduate (UG)	5.0%
2	Postgraduate (PG)	4.0%
3	Doctoral (Ph.D.)	2.7%

The pattern illustrated above highlights the existence of a participation gap that widens as students advance through the higher education system.

4.3 Faculty Representation and Institutional Inclusion

Faculty diversity is one crucial aspect of educational inclusiveness. In comparison to the community's demographic proportion, AISHE shows that Muslim representation among college and university instructors is still very low. Mentorship, academic assistance, and representation in higher education institutions may be impacted by the small number of minority faculty members.

Previous research has highlighted the value of supportive institutional environments and faculty role models, especially for students from marginalized groups and first-generation learners. The results indicate that

institutional diversity may be a significant factor impacting educational experiences and advancement, even if the current study does not establish a direct relationship between faculty representation and student's achievement.

4.4 Gender Dimensions of Participation

Gender-based analysis shows both positive trends and ongoing difficulties. Muslim students' Gender Parity Index (GPI) improved from roughly 0.93 in 2018-19 to 0.98 in 2021-22, indicating a steady shift towards gender parity in participation in higher education. The increase in female enrollment indicates that Muslim women are more interested and motivated to pursue higher education. Data from NSSO and UDISE+ point out that difficulty still present during the transition period between secondary and higher education. For female students, financial limitations, mobility issues, residential facilities, and access to local institutions may impact on their educational prospects.

5. Discussion

5.1 Economic Vulnerability and Educational Participation: It is important to consider home economic conditions when interpreting the enrollment reduction during the pandemic. A significant percentage of Muslim households work in the informal economy, which is characterized by low social protection and unstable income. In India, household earnings and informal employment were greatly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic's economic disruptions. It is more difficult for economically disadvantaged households to pay for the expenses of higher education, such as tuition, transportation, housing, and lost wages. Therefore, the reported drop in enrollment during 2020-2021 is in accordance with more general research that suggests financial shocks can affect educational participation, especially among low-income groups.

5.2 Financial Support and Educational Continuity: In addition to lowering the costs of higher education, scholarships, fellowships, and other educational support can have an impact on enrollment and continuing decisions. There has been debate over the possible effects of recent policy changes on minority students, such as changes to scholarship programs and the termination of the Maulana Azad National Fellowship (MANF). The very low number of Muslim students pursuing doctorates and postgraduate degrees requires more research on the financial obstacles influencing participation in higher education and research. The very low number of Muslim students pursuing doctorates and postgraduate degrees points to the need for more research on the financial obstacles influencing participation in higher education and research.

5.3 Affordability and Institutional Access: The results show that students' decisions on higher education institutions are influenced by the expense of education. Currently available research indicates that a significant percentage of Muslim students attend government and government-aided universities, whereas their representation in more expensive private institutions continues to be very small. The distribution is strongly correlated with the financial status of households and families' capacity to pay for schooling. Tuition fees and associated expenses are a major factor in determining access to higher education possibilities for students from economically disadvantaged households. These patterns demonstrate the ongoing significance of reasonably priced public universities in advancing educational access. In order to prevent financial hardships from limiting educational chances for underprivileged students, they also recommended that financial assistance programs, such as student support plans and scholarships, be strengthened.

5.4 Geographic Irregularities and Educational Access: The previous studies show that there are significant regional differences in the availability of colleges, universities, and professional institutions. Participating in higher education may entail significant transportation, lodging, and opportunity costs for students who live in places with poor educational infrastructure, especially for female students and those from low-income families. According to the findings, increasing the spatial distribution of students support services and educational infrastructure may encourage participation and lessen regional differences in access to higher education.

6. Policy Implications and Conclusions

6.1 Policy Implication: There are some ramifications for educational planning and policy. First, improving need-based financial aid could aid in lowering financial obstacles that hinder enrollment and advancement. Research fellowships, scholarship programs, and focused support initiatives can help to socioeconomically disadvantaged students participate. *Second, improving access and lowering geographic disparities* could be achieved by developing educational infrastructure in underprivileged areas. Students in places with low educational attainment may find it easier to overcome obstacles if public institutions and transportation assistance receive more funding. *Third, progression rates* could be raised by improving the transitional pathways between secondary and postsecondary education. First-generation students and students from underprivileged backgrounds may benefit most from bridge programs, academic support programs, and career counseling services. Programs that support diversity, inclusiveness, and mentoring in higher education may be advantageous to institutions. Increasing Equal Opportunity: Improved institutional support systems and cells may help increase student achievement and retention.

6.2 Strategic Directions for Inclusive Higher Education: The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020's goal, initiatives to enhance educational inclusion should concentrate on removing institutional and financial obstacles to involvement. More equitable outcomes across social groups are anticipated to result from policies targeted at enhancing affordability, accessibility, and educational continuity. Students from socioeconomically challenged households may need extra care because their involvement is still susceptible to institutional limitations and economic disturbances. A more durable route to fair participation in higher education might be offered by an all-encompassing strategy that incorporates funding, infrastructural development, academic support, and institutional inclusion.

6.3 Conclusion:

This study examined trends in Muslim student's enrollment in Indian higher education between 2018-19 and 2022-23 using data from AISHE, NSSO, and UDSE+. The findings reveal a persistent participation gap despite the overall expansion of higher education in India. While total enrollment increased during the study period, Muslim students remained underrepresented relative to their share of the national population, and participation declined noticeably during the pandemic years. The analysis indicates that the decline in enrollment coincided with a combination of structural economic disruptions, financial constraints, and structural barriers affecting educational access. The pandemic intensified existing vulnerabilities among households dependent on informal sector employment, while rising educational costs and uneven access to institutional support appear to have influenced participation patterns. The findings also suggest that representation decreases progressively from undergraduate to doctoral levels, highlighting challenges in educational progression and retention.

The study further identifies disparities related to geography, institutional access, and educational affordability. Limited access to higher education institutions in certain regions, dependence on publicly funded colleges, and lower participation in high-cost professional programmes may contribute to unequal educational opportunities. Although gender parity has improved over time, barriers related to mobility, affordability, and educational infrastructure continue to affect participation among female students. These findings underscore the importance of strengthening inclusive educational policies within the framework of the national education policy (NEP) 2020. Measures aimed at improving financial assistance, expanding educational infrastructure, supporting student's transitions, and promoting institutional inclusion may contribute to reducing participation gaps and improving educational outcomes among socio-economically disadvantaged groups.

All India seeks to expand its knowledge economy and achieve the goals associated with Viksit Bharat 2047, ensuring equitable access to higher education remains a critical policy priority. Broadening participation across all sections of society is not only a matter of educational equity but also an important investment in the country's long-term social and economic development.

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