



# A STUDY ON GENDER AND CASTE INEQUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIAN CIRCUMSTANCES

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## **Abstract:**

This study considers the gender and caste inequality that exists among every region, social class and prevents the growth of Indian education systems. The reality of gender inequality and caste of higher education in India is very complex and diversified, because it exists in every field like education, employment opportunities, income, health, cultural issues, social issues, economic issues etc. An attempt has been made to find out those factors which are responsible for this problem in Indian education systems. So, this paper highlights the multi-dimensional circumstance of gender and caste, rural and urban inequalities prevalent in Indian education systems. Overall, the study indicates the inequality in economic, social, cultural and legal biasness which are of a great challenge for policy-makers and social scientists to establish proper equality in the entire social field. The researchers have tried to suggest some relevant strategies and policies implication for reducing this gender and caste inequality and to promote the dignified position for Indian gender and caste.

**Keywords:** Higher education, Gender, Caste, inequality

## **Introduction:**

Gender and caste inequality in India refers to health, education, economic and political inequalities between men and women in India. Various international gender and caste inequality indices rank India differently on each of these factors, as well as on a composite basis, and these indices are controversial. Gender inequalities, and its social causes, impact India's sex ratio, women's health over their lifetimes, their educational attainment, and economic conditions. Gender and caste inequality in India is a multifaceted issue that concerns men and

women alike. Some argue that some gender and caste equality measures, place men at a disadvantage. However, when India's population is examined as a whole, women and caste are at a disadvantage in several important ways.

### **Gender and caste inequalities in higher education**

Probably the most important problem faced by the higher education system in India is the persistence of inequalities in access to higher education. Inequalities in access to higher education result in socio-economic inequalities in the society which, in turn, accentuate inequalities in education. In fact, it is a cyclic chain of Inequalities: inequalities in access to higher education result in inequities in access to labor market information, which result in inequalities in employment and participation in labor market, resulting in inequalities in earnings / take-home pay contributing in turn to socio-economic and political inequalities. The socio-economic and political inequalities again are translated into the education sector, resulting in inequalities in education. Inequalities in access to education reflect loss in individual as well as social welfare. That economic returns to investment in education of the weaker sections are estimated to be higher than returns to their counterparts, implies that inequalities in education would cause huge losses in national output; and that inclusive strategies that contribute to equity should be viewed favorably not only from the point of view of social justice but also even in terms of economic well-being, as the total equity gains might surpass the losses in efficiency, if any (Patnaik, 2012). One of the most important dimensions of inequality is between men and women and caste. Women are generally found to be lagging behind men in every sector including higher education in India as in many countries, though reverse trends could be observed of late in a good number of countries.

During the post-independence period, there is a significant improvement in women's participation in higher education. The percentage of female enrolment to total enrolment has increased from 45% in 2014-15 to around 49% in 2020. While there were only 14 women per 100 men in higher education in 1950-51, according to the available UGC statistics (UGC, 2013). Thus, compared to the earlier decades, this marks a significant improvement. While this 49 per cent is an all-India average across all disciplines of study, there are wide variations between different states and also across disciplines. Women students constitute 29.2 per cent in engineering/technology, 17 per cent in medicine (2016). Nevertheless, the overall level of participation of women in higher education has improved remarkably and the current overall level is quite impressive.

Overall, the GER for higher education has increased from 24.1 percent in 2016-17 to 27.3 percent in 2020-21. This positive trend indicates an increasing number of students enrolling in higher education. However, the data also shows a significant gap between male and female GER, with females consistently having lower GER than males across all years. In 2020-21, the difference in GER between males and females was 1.2 percentage points. In 2016-17, the GER for males was 24.3 percent, while for females, it was 23.8 percent. By 2020-21, the GER for males had increased to 26.7 percent, and for females, it had increased to 27.9 percent

Gross Enrolment Ratio at Higher Education level 2016-17 to 2020-21									Both
State/UTs	ALL			Scheduled Castes			Scheduled Tribes		
	Male	Female	Both	Male	Female	Both	Male	Female	
<b>India</b>									
2020-21	26.7	27.9	27.3	22.4	23.9	23.1	18.8	19.1	18.9
2019-20	24.8	26.4	25.6	21.5	23.2	22.3	17.0	17.0	17.0
2018-19	24.4	25.5	24.9	21.4	22.8	22.0	16.7	16.1	16.4
2017-18	24.5	24.6	24.6	21.0	21.0	21.0	16.0	14.5	15.3
2016-17	24.3	23.8	24.1	20.8	19.9	20.3	15.8	13.9	14.8

Source: AIHES, Ministry of Education (different years).

Moreover, the GER for SCs and STs is lower than the national average for all categories. However, there has been a significant improvement in the GER for SC and ST females from 2016-17 to 2020-21. In 2020-21, the GER for SCs was 23.1 percent, and for STs, is 18.9 percent, compared to the national average of 27.3 percent. On the other hand, the GER for SC females in 2016-17 was 13.9 percent, but by 2020-21, it had increased to 19.1 percent. Despite improvements, GER indicates that students from marginalized communities still face barriers to accessing higher education. While the overall trend of increasing GER is positive, the persistent gender and social inequality in access to higher education is a matter of concern. Policymakers must address the root causes of these inequalities and take appropriate measures to ensure that all students, regardless of gender or social background, have equal opportunities to pursue higher education. Overall, the GER for higher education has increased from 24.1 percent in 2016-17 to 27.3 percent in 2020-21. This positive trend indicates an increasing number of students enrolling in higher education. However, the data also shows a significant gap between male and female GER, with females consistently having lower GER than males across all years. In 2020-21, the difference in GER between males and females was 1.2 percentage points. In 2016-17, the GER for males was 24.3 percent, while for females, it was 23.8 percent. By 2020-21, the GER for males had increased to 26.7 percent, and for females, it had increased to 27.9 percent.

## Inequalities by social groups

It is widely recognized that inequalities across social groups are multi-dimensional and difficult to capture empirically. Inequality by caste is a major phenomenon in India, and is also subject to extensive rigorous research, policy making and policy analysis. Caste is considered as one of the most important determinants of perceived social status in India (Bros 2014), and is ‘too strong to be suppressed permanently’ (Deshpande, 2012). SCs and STs are traditionally regarded as the most backward sections of the Indian society. They were also subject to discrimination in social, political and economic spheres for a long time and to correct some of these historical disadvantages, reservations are provided to them in education and employment. Some more castes are recognized as ‘other backward castes’. Following the Mandal Commission Report (Government of India, 1980), adopted by the Government of India, reservation policy was extended to a few ‘other’ backward castes. Some of the minority religious groups, like the Muslims, have been lagging far behind others in education development. The report of the Sachar Committee (Government of India, 2006) has highlighted this in the recent years. This has also become an important issue of research, and also an important policy issue (Hasan, 2012). It is often quoted that SCs constitute only 12 per cent of the total enrolments in higher education and STs 4.5 per cent (2011–12); or Muslims constitute such a small proportion. But a more meaningful analysis can be based on enrolment ratios and the rates of higher education attainment.

### A Table Based on the All India Survey on Higher Education 2020-21 Report Presents some Critical Statistics at the All India Level for Higher Education in India

Category	Total	Male	Female	Rural	Urban
Institutions	51,649	30,911	20,738	31,316	20,333
Enrolment	40.15 million	24.28 million	15.87 million	19.56 million	20.59 million
Teachers	15.12 million	9.25 million	5.87 million	7.18 million	7.94 million
Gross Enrolment Ratio	27.1 percent	28.7 percent	25.1 percent	23.3 percent	31.8 percent
Male-to-female ratio	1.53:1	–	–	1.71:1	1.32:1
Student-to-teacher ratio	26.6	26.2	27.1	25.5	28.2
SC enrolment	8.14 million	4.79 million	3.35 million	3.88 million	4.26 million

ST enrolment	3.91 million	2.23 million	1.68 million	2.50 million	1.41 million
OBC enrolment	15.34 million	9.10 million	6.24 million	7.85 million	7.48 million
Minority enrolment	5.39 million	2.94 million	2.45 million	1.98 million	3.41 million

Source: AIHES, Ministry of Education (different years).

### Inequalities by caste

The enrolment ratios of SCs and STs have been consistently very much below those of non-scheduled population or the total population on average. But both SCs and STs have made significant advancement by increasing the enrolment ratios of the respective population groups by four to five times in about two decades and a half between 1983–84 and 2009–10. The growth was relatively faster in case of ST, though in absolute terms their enrolment ratio is less than that of the SC; and as a result, the differences between SC and ST have come down; and also the differences between the scheduled population and non-scheduled population declined. However, it must be added that: (a) the enrolment ratios among both the SC and ST are low and (b) still significant inequalities persist between scheduled and non-scheduled population groups. The enrolment ratio in 2009–10 was nearly 12 per cent among the ST and 15 per cent among the SC compared to 23 per cent for all quite interestingly, there is not much variation in the eligible enrolment ratio between several caste groups. While it ranges between 50 per cent and 54 per cent for SC, for OBCs and others (non-backward sections), the ratio is much higher, 62 per cent in case of STs. Between various caste groups the transition rate ranges between 14 per cent (for ST) and 22 per cent (SC). SCs are ahead of all others.

The national SC GER for higher education has increased from 20.3 percent in 2016-17 to 23.1 percent in 2020-21. Chandigarh had the highest SC GER of all states and UTs in 2020-21, with a value of 52.5 percent. Bihar had the lowest SC GER of all states and UTs in 2020-21, with a value of 11.5 percent. Other states and UTs with a high SC GER in 2020-21 include Tamil Nadu (43.5 percent), Delhi (42.8 percent), and Haryana (39.1 percent) Karnataka (32.80 percent) other states and UTs with a low SC GER in 2020-21 include Jharkhand (15.5 percent), Uttar Pradesh (14.6 percent), and Rajasthan (13.5 percent). The national ST GER for higher education has increased from 14.8 percent in 2016-17 to 18.9 percent in 2020-21. Lakshadweep had the highest ST GER of all states and UTs in 2020-21, with a value of 60.7 percent. Bihar had the lowest ST GER of all states and UTs in 2020-21, with a value of 10.9 percent. Other states and UTs with a high ST GER in 2020-21 include Mizoram (54.7 percent), Arunachal Pradesh (34.6 percent), and Nagaland (32.8 percent). Other states and UTs with a low ST GER in 2020-21 include Gujarat (4.4 percent), Jharkhand (4.7 percent), and Rajasthan (4.9 percent). Overall, the data suggests that there has been an increase in the GER for higher education across

India, with some states and UTs showing more progress than others. However, there is still a significant GER gap between castes and genders, with SC and ST populations lagging behind the national average.

### **Rural–urban disparities** **Rural and Urban**

The GER at the higher education level is lower in rural areas compared to urban areas. As per the AISHE data, the GER at the higher education level in rural areas was 25.7 percent in 2020-21, while in urban areas, it was 33.4 percent.

### **Male and female**

There is a significant gender gap in the GER at the higher education level in India. As per the AISHE data, the GER for male students at the higher education level in India was 29.3 percent in 2020-21, while for female students, it was 24.9 percent. The gender gap is more pronounced in rural areas where the GER for male students was 25.8 percent, and for female students, it was 20.7 percent.

### **Inequalities between religious groups**

Inequalities in gross enrolment ratio between various religious groups are much higher. Estimates on gross enrolment ratio are available for Hindus, Muslims, Christians and 'others'. Enrolment ratio among Muslims was only 19 per cent in 2023, while it was 24.2 per cent among Hindus and 37 per cent among Christians. The GER at the higher education level for Muslim students in India is lower compared to the overall GER in India. As per the AISHE data, the GER for Muslim students at the higher education level in India was 16.4 percent in 2020-21.

### **Higher Education: Challenges being faced in India**

India faces several challenges in higher education. Some of the significant challenges are:

**Access and equity:** One of the biggest challenges is providing access to quality higher education to a diverse population. Many students from disadvantaged backgrounds, mainly rural areas, face significant barriers to accessing higher education.

**Quality of education:** Another challenge is the quality of education. Despite there being many higher education institutions in India, not all offer high-quality education. This leads to a mismatch between the skills required by the industry and the skills of the graduates.

**Funding:** Higher education in India requires significant funding, but the government's educational budget is limited. Many institutions of higher education struggle to secure funding for research and development, infrastructure, and faculty salaries.

**Shortage of faculty:** There is a shortage of qualified faculty in many higher education institutions, particularly in specialized fields. This shortage affects the quality of education and research.

**Outdated curriculum:** Another challenge is the outdated curriculum. Many higher education institutions have not updated curricula to keep up with industry requirements, technological advancements, and societal changes.

**Employability:** While higher education is expected to prepare students for employment, many graduates are unemployed due to a lack of practical skills, industry exposure, and soft skills.

Addressing these challenges requires significant reforms in the higher education sector, including increased funding, improved access and equity, quality assurance mechanisms, faculty development, curriculum reforms, and stronger industry-academia linkages.

### **Some of the salient points concerning GER are as follows:**

- The national GER for higher education has increased from 24.1 percent in 2016-17 to 27.3 percent in 2020-21, with both male and female GERs showing an upward trend.
- Kerala had the highest GER of all states and UTs in 2020-21, with a value of 46.5 percent.
- Bihar had the lowest GER of all states and UTs in 2020-21, with a value of 15.9 percent.
- Other states and UTs with a high GER in 2020-21 include Delhi (45.5 percent), Chandigarh (44.5 percent), and Tamil Nadu (42.5 percent).
- Other states and UTs with a low GER in 2020-21 include Jharkhand (19.6 percent), Assam (17.5 percent), and Uttar Pradesh (16.5 percent).

### ***Scheduled Castes: GER***

- The national SC GER for higher education has increased from 20.3 percent in 2016-17 to 23.1 percent in 2020-21.
- Chandigarh had the highest SC GER of all states and UTs in 2020-21, with a value of 52.5 percent.
- Bihar had the lowest SC GER of all states and UTs in 2020-21, with a value of 11.5 percent.
- Other states and UTs with a high SC GER in 2020-21 include Tamil Nadu (43.5 percent), Delhi (42.8 percent), and Haryana (39.1 percent).
- Other states and UTs with a low SC GER in 2020-21 include Jharkhand (15.5 percent), Uttar Pradesh (14.6 percent), and Rajasthan (13.5 percent).

### ***Scheduled Tribes: GER***

- The national ST GER for higher education has increased from 14.8 percent in 2016-17 to 18.9 percent in 2020-21.
- Lakshadweep had the highest ST GER of all states and UTs in 2020-21, with a value of 60.7 percent.
- Bihar had the lowest ST GER of all states and UTs in 2020-21, with a value of 10.9 percent.
- Other states and UTs with a high ST GER in 2020-21 include Mizoram (54.7 percent), Arunachal Pradesh (34.6 percent), and Nagaland (32.8 percent).
- Other states and UTs with a low ST GER in 2020-21 include Gujarat (4.4 percent), Jharkhand (4.7 percent), and Rajasthan (4.9 percent).

Overall, the data suggests that there has been an increase in the GER for higher education across India, with some states and UTs showing more progress than others. However, there is still a significant GER gap between castes and genders, with SC and ST populations lagging behind the national average.

### **Conclusion**

This study has analyzed the trend and pattern of the inequality in access to higher education among different economic classes in India and the barriers they face in their participation in higher education. Some factors have been examined here. Further research should unravel the factors in more detail. However, it may be tentatively concluded that since it is not women and caste in general, but women and caste in the bottom economic strata, it is not the people in rural areas, but people belong to the bottom expenditure quintile in rural areas, who suffered most, it may be necessary to focus on economic criteria, rather than gender, caste, region (or even caste) in policy discourse that aim at improvement of educational status of the population and reduction in inequalities in higher education. Development programmes based on economic criteria, may be difficult to implement to some extent due to relatively less reliable data on economic/income levels of the households, but have an advantage of committing less errors of commissions and omissions. Growing income inequality has imprinted educational gap. Prominently, income inequality triggers gender and caste discrimination which in turn affects educational attainment. Consequently, designing equitable and affordable mechanisms can lessen income inequality and would help the population in attaining desired education. Furthermore, the policies and programmes should promote awareness regarding the importance of education among parents and their children to reduce the market gap.



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