

# Access and Equity in Higher Education of India: A Literature Review

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**Abstract:** India is one of the largest emerging economies and also the youngest nation with 50 percent of its population aged below twenty-nine. This country's ability to harness demographic window of opportunity largely depends upon expansion of inclusive knowledge economy. With Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for the age group of 18-23 at 27.1 percent by 2019-20 India is passing through the early stages of massification of higher education. With its key role in achieving inclusive growth, occupational and social mobility, this paper seeks to explore literature on different issues related to access and equity in higher education scenario of India.

**Keywords:** Higher Education, access, GER, inequality.

## 1. Introduction

India is passing through the early stages of massification (Trow, 2006) of higher education with Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for the age group 18-23 years reached 27.1 percent in 2019-20. GER is calculated by dividing the number of students enrolled in higher education out of the total population in the relevant age group of 18-23 years. New education Policy of 2020 set a national plan to achieve 50 percent GER by 2035. Universalization of higher education is crucial to harness the growth potential of young India with median age 28.4. It is well understood that India's dream of the 21st century depends upon its excel over knowledge economy where higher education plays a pivotal role in dissemination and creation of knowledge and supply of skilled labour force. Investment in higher education increases human productivity which in turn contributes to economic growth. It is not only beneficial for individuals with higher return but also important for societal point of view. Equity in higher education can be instrumental in achieving inclusive growth by providing social, occupational and economic mobility to the weaker section of the society. Higher education promotes attitudinal changes for modernisation and social transformation, formation of a strong nation-state and higher quality of individual and social life. With total enrolment above 38.5 millions India's education sector is second highest in volume after China. This century India experienced manifold growth of infrastructure in higher education from 10152 number of colleges and 254 number of universities in 2000-01 to 42343 and 1043 in 2019-20 respectively (AISHE, 2020). This rapid expansion has been

achieved by growing participation of private players in higher education. 78.6 percent of colleges are privately managed. Expanding marketization of higher education is a concern for many as it may incline towards individuals or groups with better market command. Everyone is not equally endowed to participate in the market. 'Denial of good education incapacitate an individual for life, hinders social mobility and makes it difficult to live with dignity' (Chattopadhyay, 2009). Pandemic and online education put extra stress with wide spread digital divide.

## 2. Review of Literature

A detail review of literature is required to understand theoretical and empirical developments of the issue. The impacts of increasing privatization, marketization and commercialization of higher education on different aspects of access and equity of higher education in India has been discussed by many academicians, authors, Government of India policy documents and committees of University Grants Commission. Issues that are mostly discussed in literature ranges from nature of higher education as a good, public financing of higher education, regional disparity, socio-economic inequality, expansion of higher education over time, quality of higher education to gender parity. In the following part of this chapter I shall discuss some of the papers and policy documents that I have read so far on access and equity in higher education of India.

Vergheese (2022) has categorized post-independence development of higher education into three broad stages as (a) Expansion to support self reliant development (1950-70), (b) Declining growth and public support (1970-2000) and (c) Revival and massive expansion. In the first stage after independence emphasis was on the nation-building function of higher education to meet the aspiration of self-reliant development. Indian Institute of Technology, Indian Institute of Management and National Institute of technology were established along agricultural universities and medical colleges. Following recommendations of the Radhakrishnan Commission on Education, University Grants Commission was formed. Many private colleges were turned into government aided colleges where recurring expenditure mostly met by the

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government with a grant-in-aid system. Priorities were given to ensure linking higher education with economic development, expansion with equity and quality. During this period universities including Institutes of National Importance expanded from 27 in 1950-51 to 102 in 1970-71. Colleges also grew from 578 to 3277. These efforts led to an increase in higher education enrolment from 0.24 million in 1950-51 to 2 million in 1970-71. Still GER was very low, only at 4.2 percent. This growth of the higher education sector under government regulation stagnated during the 1970s. GER marginally increased from 4.2 in 1970-71 to 4.7 in 1980-81. Real higher educational expenditure actually declined from rupees 1143.77 in 1950-51 to rupees 550.51 in 1983-84 (Tilak, 1993). Growing demand for higher education particularly for engineering, medicine and management in 1980s created new opportunities. Self-financing private colleges came into existence during the 1980s offering technical and professional courses and proliferated in the southern states of India. These self-financing private colleges, commonly known as capitation fee colleges, were mostly for-profit private institutions. They came under serious objection. 'No doubt, the reckless growth of self-financing private colleges has resulted in establishing institutions with poor infrastructure, less-qualified faculty members, and such institutions provided poor-quality higher education' (Varghese, 2022). Many public institutions also took cost recovery measures.

Tilak (1993) discussed the effect of Structural adjustment and stabilization policies adopted by Govt. of India under New Economic Policy in the 1990s on quasi-public good nature of higher education and its financing. Investment in higher education returns private benefits and there exist a private market but these returns are not limited to private individuals. With strong externality, the social benefit of higher education surpasses the sum of private benefits. In such a scenario private investment will be less than the social optimal requirement. Here government intervention becomes necessary in the provision of quasi-public goods (Tilak, 1993). Public financing also had some limitations as perceived by Tilak in 1992-93. Firstly, as private returns are higher than social it suggests higher private share in cost of higher education provision. There is no such theory to determine the optimal mix of private and public financing of higher education. Secondly, With GER of 4.9% in 1990-91 higher education was elite in nature where the majority of students came from a better section of the society with higher ability to pay than what they actually pay. Thirdly, indirect tax being the major source (85%) of tax earning, financing higher education for elite sections might lead to transfer of resources from poor to the rich. Fourth, with limited resource available expenditure in higher education cannot be possible at the cost of elementary education.

Justice Dr. K. Punayya Committee report on UGC Funding of Institutions of Higher Education suggested breaking all costs of higher educational institutes under three broad components by Academic costs, Academic Support Costs and Student Welfare Cost. Committee recommended near full cost recovery of Students Welfare Costs (hostels etc.), substantial recovery of Academic Support Costs (library, laboratories, etc.) and

responsible proportions of Academic Costs (teaching and research). Cost recovery rate should reach 25 percent gradually over the span of 10 years with 15 percent in the first five years (UGC, 1993).

Tilak (1995) argued that efforts could be made to raise additional resources without affecting equity and efficiency in higher education. Modest and gradual increase in recovery rate of recurring costs about 20-25 percent should be accompanied with introduction of well-designed scholarship and student loan programmes (Tilak, 1995). Birla-Ambani Committee (2000) emphasizes full cost recovery from students and establishment of private universities.

As investing in knowledge became profitable and corporate interest in institutions producing knowledge grew in the neo-liberal reform period, the public policy, the private interest and the household aspirations contributed to increasing social demand resulting in fast expansion of the sector in this century. The social demand for higher education, very often, surpassed the fiscal capacity of the state to finance the sector. The market-friendly reforms in the form of privatization of public institutions and fast growth of private institutions fuelled expansion of the sector. The massification of the sector is driven by private institutions and non-state funding universities. There are 80 private deemed-to-be universities, one private state open university and 10 private deemed-to-be universities by 2019-20. Private universities proliferated from 7 in 2005 to 328 in 2019-20 (AISHE, 2020).

Thorat and Khan (2018) discussed the effect of growing private sector participation in access and equity using unit level data of NSS for the years of 1995, 2007 and 2014. They claimed that the NSS 2014 survey clearly showed unequal access to lower income groups in private unaided institutions as the share of bottom income quintiles (0-20) in terms of MPCE was 25% compared to 42% for the top quintile (80-100). Share of Muslim students in private unaided institutions were about 25% lower than 39% for other minorities and 33% for Hindus. Out of the total student's population 44% accounted for government, 25% private aided and 33% private unaided. Economically weaker section of the population depended more on government institutions. Girls had near parity with boys in access (Thorat & Khan, 2018).

Chanana (2007) discussed women's disciplinary choices in the era of globalization. Choice of discipline is crucial for gender parity as it limits life chances of women. First four decades after independence women's participation clustered around arts, humanities and social sciences. This clustering of non-professional and non-market subject choices by women is explained as 'girls tend to opt for specific subjects because of their socialization which relates feminine roles of feminine subjects' (Chanana, 2007). Opening of the global market in the 1990s generated demand for skilled professionals in new areas of management, media and mass communication, fashion technology etc. Private institutions responded to this demand quickly and played a critical role in the changing disciplinary subject choice of women.

Sinha (2018) used district level census data to capture regional disparity in availability, access and equity in higher

education in India. He found that even at an early stage of massification India remained largely elitist in socio-spatial segmentation. His study at district level presented multiple narratives. (a) Tribal districts of India had low enrolment. (b) Agriculturally prosperous districts of Punjab, Western Up, and Godavari delta and Bihar had low to medium GER. (c) States that experienced social reform movement and high urbanization had promoted enrolment in higher education (Sinha, 2018).

Basant and Sen (2014) also wanted to understand dynamics of higher education participation across different socio-religious communities over 1999-2000 to 2009-10. They used a probit model of participation on NSS unit data where dependent variable took one if someone completed higher education else took zero. Explanatory variables were at individual level- age and sex, household level- household size, logarithm of monthly household consumption expenditure and location specific factors. To incorporate supply side constraint distance to secondary school used as a proxy. Their paper estimated four probit model specifications between urban and rural and between full sample and eligible sample (whether person crossed higher secondary education). It was found that Hindu OBC was more likely to complete HE compared to Hindu SC in full sample with stronger effects in urban areas. Over all the study years Hindu SC were less likely to complete higher education in comparison to Hindu Upper Caste in both urban and rural areas. Lack of access to HEI in rural areas is reflected in lower marginal effects in rural areas over urban. Muslim OBC also had lower chance of HE participation compared to Hindu SC in urban areas (Basant & Sen, 2014).

Barooah (2018) analyzed implication of English as a medium of instruction (MoI) for different socio-religious groups on choice of subject area and choice of type of institutions using multinomial logit model on 71st NSS data. Barooah had considered five available choices for subject areas namely Humanities, Science, Commerce, Engineering and Others (comprising mainly Medicine, Management and IT). Expected probability of a subject area choice depends upon personal characteristics like gender, poverty status, social group, religion, location (rural/urban), state of residence and medium of instruction (MoI) (English/Hindi or Regional). Model showed that if MoI was not English then the predicted probability of choosing Humanities was over 60%. Predicted probability of studying subjects like management, law and IT was 27% of persons with English as MoI compared to less than 9% for those whose MoI was not English (Barooah, 2018).

Deshpande (2018) calculated social diversity using Diversity Index for access and exclusion in education in India using NSS data for the 64th round (2007) and 66th round (2009-10). He incorporated religious dimension, caste dimension and gender dimension in the index. Index value calculated to capture both nation and state-wise pattern. Diversity Gap ( $DG_i^m$ ) for *ith* for *ith* group and *m* dimension defined as

$$DG_i^m = \frac{(X_i - Y_i)}{Y_i} \times Z_i$$

Where  $X_i$  represents the actual proportion of students in the *ith* group,  $Y_i$  represents eligible proportions of the *ith* group in the population and  $Z_i$  represents the proportions of group *i* in

the total population. Here positive value signifies over-representation and negative value signifies under-representation. Diversity Index *D* for *mth* dimension calculated as

$$D_m = 1 - \sum DG_i^m$$

$D=1$  will mean a situation of perfect diversity. The index will lie in between zero and one. Weighted aggregation of *D* over three dimensions will give the final value of Diversity Index. Calculations revealed that diversity of OBC and Women increased over 2007 and 2009-10. He found inter-state heterogeneity in access (Deshpande, 2018).

Mittal and Pani (2020) raised questions against GER as an indicator of access to higher education. They argued that GER failed to capture following factors:

1. Enrolment in higher education is path dependent. Students who have completed higher secondary level are eligible to enroll in higher education.
2. GER does not include students beyond the age group of 18-23
3. Enrolled students in vocational and diploma related courses are not included.
4. Students who study abroad are not included.
5. Countrywide variation in relevant age group while calculating GER

They proposed to use Eligible Enrolment Ratio (EER). 'EER is calculated as the total enrolment in HE in a given year regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the total number of the age cohort (in the official HE age group) who have attained a secondary qualification (class 12)' (Malish, 2021). By studying five year data for 10 countries they claimed that EER could be a better indicator than GER (Mittal & Pani, 2020). Malish differed to this argument. According to Malish, the share of the college-aged youth population enrolled in HEI is crucial information for socio-economic planners captured by GER. A higher value of GER indicates that more are enrolled in HEI. EER may not be able to capture this direction as high value of EER may be due to the result of lower number of eligible age-cohort (Malish, 2021).

### 3. Conclusion

Review of literature reveals that access in higher education is increasing but disproportionately. Some states are performing well where some states are not. Income and wealth is crucial in access. Overall gender parity in terms of GER is also improving. Here we need to study extensively disciplinary subject choice and determinants of it in a market economy which existing literature gave little emphasis. With regional disparity there is inter-state migration in higher education which requires immediate academic attention. We also need to study access in higher education as a level playing field or there should be equality of opportunity. Circumstances that are outside the control of individual such as sex, region of birth, family resources, and religion should not hinder individual in achieving higher education.

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